



Innovative structural and financial models in U.S. Christian education[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Financial sustainability is one of the greatest challenges facing private Christian schools. However, scant research has been conducted to identify innovative structural practices and financial models that may help sustain the mission of Christian schools. This study helps close that gap with a mixed methods inquiry into approaches like mergers and acquisitions, micro- and hybrid school models, third source income and entrepreneurship, and inclusive education, with a focus on 11 exemplars in the Christian school sector across the United States.

One of the greatest challenges facing Christian schools today is that of financial sustainability. The sustainability challenge itself results from numerous forces, including those related to enrollment, innovation, and human resources. U.S. private schools generally, and Christian schools particularly, rely on enrollment income as the primary source of revenue. Yet enrollment trends in Christian education indicate that the demographic groups on which Christian schools historically have relied are shrinking in part because fewer Americans identify with the Christian faith (Smith, 2021). This is also evidenced by the fact that the enrollment gap between high- and middle-income families is widening, due to declining numbers of middle class families enrolling (Murnane et al., 2018). Data from the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)—the largest Protestant school association in the United States, with over 2200 member schools (Broughman et al., 2021)—show that average need-based financial aid at the median Christian school is less than one-third the cost of tuition, and that larger schools enroll a lower percentage of students receiving tuition assistance (ACSI, 2021).

Identifying and implementing innovative practices related to financial sustainability may be integral to ensuring that schools will exist and thrive into the future. Research documents much evidence that innovative practices are correlated with educational effectiveness (Muijs et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2006; Reynolds et al., 2014). However, according to van der Walt and Zecha (2004), contributions identifying innovative and school improvement practices related to school effectiveness in the Christian school sector have been lacking. Further, only

approximately one-third of Christian schools offer innovative programs, online courses, or alternative curricula (ACSI, 2021), while a majority do not plan to maintain any innovative practices adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Swaner & Lee, 2020).

It is important to consider the U.S. context of this study, given its complex legal and policy history of public funding for faith-based schools. Historically, religious schools in the United States have received limited public funding from federal, state, and local entities. This funding reality stands in contrast to other countries, including the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, in which faith-based schools may be directly funded by the government (D'Agostino et al., 2022), though perhaps at lower levels than government schools (Cheng et al., 2022). Thus, the innovation and sustainability challenge for private Christian schools in the United States is distinct from the challenges facing faith-based schools in countries with more pluralistic and equitable funding systems.

In the United States, private school choice programs have provided some public resources to private schools, but have historically excluded religious private schools. Town tuitioning programs, which allow students living in rural communities without a district public school to use public funds to attend a public or non-religious private school, have existed for over a century in Vermont (1869) and Maine (1873). Many state legislatures have passed “Blaine Amendments” prohibiting the use of public funds to attend faith-based private schools (Berner, 2019). More recently, Supreme Court decisions in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*

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(2002), concerning the Blaine Amendment governing Ohio's Educational Choice scholarship program, and *Carson v. Makin* (2022), concerning Maine's town tuitioning program, ruled that private school choice programs could not discriminate against religious schools on the basis of faith (Garnett, 2023). Similarly, the Court held in *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer* (2017) and *Espinoza v. Montana* (2020) that a school could not be prohibited from participating in a publicly-funded program because of its religious affiliation, theoretically opening the door for religious charter schools (Smarick, 2020).

Thus, the rise of universal private school choice legislation in the United States presents new opportunities for private Christian schools (EdChoice, 2022; Wolf and Macedo, 2004). Christian school leaders express a willingness to participate in these programs: over 80% of Christian school leaders reported a "very good chance" or being "certain" to participate in a private school choice program with no changes to school operations or additional government regulations (Lee et al., 2022), exceeding rates of private school leaders generally in previous studies of similar research design (DeAngelis et al., 2019, 2021). Nonetheless, concerns over regulations imposed by such programs may dissuade private Christian schools from participating (Russo, 2009; Stuit and Doan, 2013; Austin, 2015; Kisida et al., 2015; Egalite et al., 2018; Ferguson, 2020). Lee et al. (2022) find that open enrollment mandates and employment regulations could substantially reduce or even eliminate Christian school participation from private school choice programs.

Another challenge for the Christian school sector is the human resources challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated widespread stress among teachers and leaders (Swaner et al., 2021), high turnover rates in school leadership, and compensation rates significantly below rates in other sectors (Lee et al., 2021; Swaner & Ferguson, 2020), which were already prevalent in Christian schools particularly as well as public schools generally (Will, 2021). Although three-quarters of ACSI school leaders surveyed in fall 2020 reported that mental health and overwork were top concerns, two-thirds of school leaders stated their school did not have an intentional plan to support teachers and one-fifth of respondents indicated "not really doing much" to address mental health and overwork (Swaner & Lee, 2020). While schools cannot control external factors, internal practices and policies within their control can help support (or undermine) educator well-being (Cheng et al., 2023; Miller and Hill, 2022).

Despite the challenges facing Christian schools, no research has been conducted that identifies innovative school models and practices related to school sustainability, or the factors associated with the school community's optimism that their school will continue to sustain its mission into the future. We aim to help close that gap with this mixed methods study on Christian school financial sustainability and innovative structural models, in which we identified and studied 11 Christian schools and systems. (See Table 1 for analytic sample of schools.) Our two research questions are:

RQ1: How are U.S. Christian schools are addressing sustainability in innovative ways that increase access?

RQ2: What are the relationships between educators' perspectives on innovation and access and their level of optimism about their schools' sustainability?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Remembering that our research is mixed methods in design, we present our methodology and integrated results from our quantitative and qualitative research. We then discuss the overall findings and conclude with implications for Christian schools and directions for further research.

1. Methodology

1.1. Qualitative methodology

1.1.1. Appreciative inquiry

The qualitative study in our research into financial sustainability and

Table 1
Purposive Sample of Schools.

Name	Abbrev.	Location	Innovation
Chattanooga Christian School	CCS	Chattanooga, TN	Community Partnerships; Inclusion; Microschools
Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg	CSAGH	Harrisburg, PA	Mergers/Acquisitions
Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy	CHCA	Cincinnati, OH	Satellite Campus; Innovative Programs; Voucher
The City School	TCS	Philadelphia, PA	Mergers/Acquisitions
Grand Rapids Christian Schools	GRCS	Grand Rapids, MI	Community Partnerships; Inclusion
Hope Academy	HA	Minneapolis, MN	Third Source Income/Leasing
HOPE Christian Schools	HCS	Milwaukee, WI	Voucher; Charter School; Microschools
Lynden Christian Schools	LCS	Lynden, WA	Third Source Income; Inclusion
Oaks Christian School	OCS	Westlake Village, CA	Innovative Programs; Institutes
Valley Christian Schools	VCS	Youngstown, OH	Voucher; Multisite; Microschools
Valor Christian High School	VCHS	Highland Ranch, CO	Innovative Programs

structural innovation in the private Christian school sector is guided by an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework. AI arises from the fields of organizational behavior and uses a social constructivist approach to focus on uncovering the positive traits of an organization, with a view toward a strengths-based model of organizational change. According to Stavros et al. (2015):

At its heart, AI is about the search for the best in people, their organizations, and the strengths-filled, opportunity-rich world around them. AI... is a fundamental shift in the overall perspective taken throughout the entire change process to 'see' the wholeness of the human system and to 'inquire' into that system's strengths, possibilities, and successes. (p. 97).

An AI framework guides the formulation of a study's research questions as well as the development of qualitative tools (interview schedules, focus group protocols, document analysis) used in the research. While AI does not ignore challenges facing organizations, questions posed to participants focused on identifying the internal processes and resources that enable both the organization and its stakeholders to thrive.

This framework was employed through focus groups and individual interviews ($n = 55$) over Zoom in 2020, each generally ranging from 30 to 60 min, via semi-structured protocols for responsive interviewing (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Overall, we transcribed and coded over 40 h of interviews to identify themes. Further, we conducted site visits to all 11 schools and districts between 2021 and 2022, which involved in-person interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to facilitate triangulation and gain further insights into themes (Patton, 2002). We also conducted analysis of key school records, including financial data, mission and vision statements, program descriptions, and other school-provided documents.

1.1.2. School selection

We purposively sampled school organizations according to the following inclusion criteria:

1. Schools or systems of schools in the United States must serve a range of grades anywhere between K-12.
2. Innovative models used by schools or school systems must fall into one or more of the following categories: mergers and acquisitions; voucher programs or school choice networks; property ownership

- and leasing; online or hybrid programs; micro-business hubs; or closely related categories.
- 3. The innovative model of school finance and structure must be in operation at the time of study and must have served as one of the school's or school system's primary business or operational models for no less than two years at the time of study, rather than being in a pilot phase or limited in scope relative to the rest of the school's operation.
- 4. The innovative model must have as one of its goals the inclusion of students, families, and/or communities typically underserved by Christian schools and/or by the specific school or system of schools being considered for participation in the study.

The researchers generated an initial list of possible participants by procuring nominations of "innovative" schools from three Christian school organization leaders, two university faculty familiar with Christian schools, and three additional consultants who work extensively with Christian schools in implementing organizational change efforts. These nominations were then cross-checked with the list of innovations identified in the second criterion above. Nominated schools were then examined using *Independent School Management's* (2012) "sustainability markers," which ISM identified as correlated with "private schools' ability to sustain excellence in student programs." These include consistent donor cultivation, development office capacity, meaningfully competitive faculty salaries, perceived adequacy of employee benefits, enrollment demand in excess of supply, internal marketing, master property or facilities plan, quality of facilities, and strategic plan/strategic financial plan. While two of the ISM markers—related to cash reserves and the percentage of school's operating expense that is covered by billable monies or funds transferred from interest-bearing accounts—were not used as exclusion criteria (due to the likelihood that they would result in the exclusion of schools that leverage school choice programs extensively), participating schools or systems were screened for financial health, including a history of balanced budgets and steady growth.

As a result of this sampling process, we identified twelve schools or school systems engaged in innovative practices or utilizing structural models related to financial sustainability. Eleven consented to participate in the study. The schools and systems in the final sample are geographically diverse not only in terms of representing broad U.S. regions, but also in their urban, suburban, or rural setting. The oldest school in our sample was founded in 1910 (Lynden Christian Schools), but our study includes schools founded as recently as 2007 (Valor Christian High School) or resulting from mergers in 2006 (The City School) and 2017 (Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg). Student enrollment ranged from 400 students to 3500 students for schools in the sample. Each school organization's particular innovations are identified in Table 1.

1.2. Quantitative methodology

1.2.1. Instrumentation

In addition to qualitative analysis, we conducted correlational analysis of the factors associated with respondents' optimism in relation to school sustainability. We invited administrators, faculty, staff, and board members of the 11 schools and systems to complete a short survey in which they indicated how strongly they agree with 16 items related to their perceptions of their school's financial sustainability, accessibility to families, and innovativeness on a four-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 4 = *Strongly agree*).

As we did not intend to uncover latent factors in our survey design, we identified covariate groupings using principal components analysis (PCA). PCA yielded four components with eigenvalues exceeding one. Together, these four components cumulatively explain nearly 60% of the variation. Because the survey was not designed to have theoretically discrete components, we used a promax oblique rotation, allowing

components to be correlated with each other, though orthogonal rotations yield similar item groupings. We label the four components "Commitment to access," "Openness to change," "Quality of relationships," and "Optimism about the school's future." (See Table 2 for instrument descriptive statistics, Table 3 for full survey instrument, and Table 4 for principal components analysis.)

1.2.2. Survey respondents

Overall, 553 respondents completed the survey representing the 11 schools and systems in our sample, including 75 administrators, 318 teachers, 77 support staff, 14 board members, and 55 other members of the school community. Respondents indicating some other responsibility with the school included those working in admissions, athletics, counseling, and other responsibilities. The number of responses per school ranged from 1 to 107. The modal respondent was in the first year of employment at the school, with an average of 7.6 years of experience at the current school and a maximum of 31 years in the overall sample. (See Table 2 for sample descriptive statistics.)

1.2.3. Empirical strategy

To descriptively test relationship between components and optimism about the school's future, we estimate the following model:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \kappa'_i \beta + X'_i \beta + \epsilon_i$$

where y_i represents a standardized measure of respondent i 's optimism that the school will be open or more accessible in ten years, κ'_i is a row vector of component variables for "Commitment to Access," "Openness to Change," or "Quality of Relationships," standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, and ϵ_i is an idiosyncratic error term. In our fully specified model, we include X'_i , a vector of respondent i 's demographic characteristics including role and experience, to test for the robustness of the relationships between components and optimism to the inclusion or exclusion of these covariates. As this analysis is

Table 2
Sample and instrument descriptive statistics.

	n	Mean	SD	Component
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Role</i>				
Administrator	553	0.14	0.34	
Teacher	553	0.58	0.49	
Staff	553	0.14	0.35	
Board	553	0.03	0.16	
Other	553	0.10	0.30	
Experience at current school (years)	545	7.55	6.89	
<i>Survey instrument</i>				
1. Expanding access	548	4.25	0.92	Commitment to Access
2. Shared vision	543	3.86	1.02	Commitment to Access
3. Innovative access	540	3.44	1.18	Commitment to Access
4. Welcoming	545	4.28	0.81	Commitment to Access
5. Collaboration	535	3.45	1.22	
6. Support underserved students	540	3.63	1.09	Commitment to Access
7. Adequate resources	538	3.48	1.19	
8. Risk-taking	537	3.73	1.09	Openness to Change
9. Feedback	544	3.80	1.12	Openness to Change
10. Change	545	3.82	1.09	Openness to Change
11. Teacher relationships	544	4.59	0.56	Quality of Relationships
12. Administrator relationships	544	4.46	0.69	Quality of Relationships
13. Observations	527	2.74	1.20	Openness to Change
14. Community connection	542	3.66	1.02	Openness to Change
15. Open	538	4.48	0.62	Optimism about the School's Future
16. More accessible	539	4.16	0.89	Optimism about the School's Future

Table 3
Survey instrument.

#	Item	Abbreviation	Component
1	Expanding access to underserved students is important to our school.	Expanding access	Commitment to Access
2	There is a shared vision between teachers and administrators, for increased access for underserved students.	Shared vision	Commitment to Access
3	Our school's approach to increased access for underserved students is innovative.	Innovative access	Commitment to Access
4	Our school welcomes underserved students.	Welcoming	Commitment to Access
5	Administrators collaborate with teachers to determine innovative approaches to instruction for underserved students.	Collaboration	
6	Our school effectively supports underserved students.	Support underserved students	Commitment to Access
7	There are adequate resources to support our school's goals for increasing access for students.	Adequate resources	
8	Risk-taking informed by reflection is encouraged.	Risk-taking	Openness to Change
9	Our school regularly solicits feedback for improvement from the school community.	Feedback	Openness to Change
10	Our school welcomes change.	Change	Openness to Change
11	I have good working relationships with teachers.	Teacher relationships	Quality of Relationships
12	I have good working relationships with administrators.	Administrator relationships	Quality of Relationships
13	There is adequate time for teachers to observe each other teach.	Observations	Openness to Change
14	Our school has a close connection to the surrounding community.	Community connection	Openness to Change
15	Our school will be open to students ten years from now.	Open	Optimism about the School's Future
16	Our school will be accessible to more students in ten years than it is today.	More accessible	Optimism about the School's Future

descriptive and exploratory, we consider estimates with a *p*-value less than 0.01 ($\alpha = 0.99$) to minimize the risk of Type I errors.

We theorize that respondents who believe their school promotes access, embraces change, and fosters quality relationships will also be more optimistic that their school will continue to sustain its mission into

Table 4
Principal components analysis.

Item	Commitment to Access	Openness to Change	Quality of Relationships	Optimism	Unexplained ψ
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1	0.499				0.305
2	0.455				0.355
3	0.401				0.390
4	0.413				0.416
5					0.384
6	0.312				0.415
7					0.560
8		0.375			0.484
9		0.422			0.488
10		0.343			0.467
11			0.700		0.315
12			0.612		0.344
13		0.524			0.501
14		0.346			0.683
15				0.731	0.216
16				0.638	0.286

the future. First, given the enrollment challenge (Murnane et al., 2018), promoting access is directly related to a school's financial sustainability. Second, innovative practices are correlated with educational effectiveness (Harris et al., 2006, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2014) and ineffective schools are unlikely to remain open. Finally, educator well-being is likely a function of quality relationships (Miller and Hill, 2022), and quality relationships may help reduce turnover and improve effectiveness (Swaner and Ferguson, 2020). Thus, respondents who recognize ways in which their schools are addressing the enrollment, innovation, and human resources challenge are more likely to be optimistic about their school's sustainability.

However, it must also be stated that our analysis is correlational by design. Given the qualitative nature of our study, the AI framework, and purposive sampling of schools, we cannot address the underlying endogeneity or ignore the possibility that optimistic respondents are more likely to report their schools engage in such behaviors. Nonetheless, our correlational analysis can yield important insights for how addressing the challenges facing private Christian schools may be related to school sustainability.

2. Findings

Our findings are classified by three broad themes that emerged from the study—*mission and culture*; *structures and practices*; and *community engagement*.

2.1. Theme 1: mission and culture

A school's mission can provide a school with organizational distinctiveness and can guide a school to innovate programmatically, structurally, and financially, while shaping their culture within the defined parameters of the school's mission. Here we highlight the practices of seven schools.

2.1.1. Missional clarity

The City School (TCS) was founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as the merger of Spruce Hill Christian School and City Center Academy in 2006, with the mission "to train students' minds, disciple their hearts and bring light to the city—one child at a time." Missional clarity led to the decision to raise tuition by 30% over multiple years, which was intended to broaden the socioeconomic diversity of the school and to generate funds to improve programs and buildings. It also led to the merger with Philadelphia Mennonite High School in 2014, which allowed the school to have a centralized upper school campus with neighborhood-based elementary campuses. TCS currently serves over four hundred students across its three campuses in three distinct

neighborhoods of Philadelphia.

Hope Academy (HA) in Minneapolis, Minnesota was founded to educate traditionally underserved students with the mission “to foster hope in God within the inner-city neighborhoods of Minneapolis by providing youth with a remarkable, God-centered education.” Although their financial model allows families to enroll for as little as \$75 per month, HA’s commitment to provide a “remarkable” education meant school leadership was adamant that students would receive a high-quality, college-preparatory education. To that end, the school relies on a unique financial model in which scholarship partners pay 90% of a student’s tuition, rather than the traditional private school model in which 90% or more of the revenues are covered by tuition. To guard against drift away from their founding mission, HA maintains a policy that 75% of the student body must meet the financial and at-risk profile that undergirds the partnership model. Thus, HA’s missional commitment is as much about what the school will not do.

Valor Christian High School (VCHS) was founded in 2007 in Highlands Ranch, Colorado with the vision to “prepare tomorrow’s leaders to transform the world for Christ” and the mission to “provide a purpose-driven college preparatory program, within a vibrant Christ-centered environment that empowers students to discover their passions and to develop their unique gifts and abilities while growing in wisdom, knowledge, leadership, faith and service.” To preserve the founding vision of the school and guard against mission drift, the bylaws governing the board were changed to create a distinct class of “voting members” composed of four of the founding families. These members were empowered with the ability to approve or disapprove hiring decisions about future heads of school and proposed changes to the founding vision and mission. Thus, these founders bound themselves in a long-term commitment to the school while transitioning oversight to a new board.

2.1.2. Relevance to the community

Lynden Christian Schools (LCS) has been serving its community in Lynden, WA near the Canadian border for nearly 100 years. Its close partnership with its community continues to drive many of its programmatic innovations, including its redesigned Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, designed to meet the job needs of the state. Through this effort, LCS has facilitated opportunities for their students to be leaders within the vocational careers their communities need, with skill development programs in agriculture, small-engines, welding, and construction.

TCS cultivated reciprocal relationships with its community in Philadelphia, embedding itself into the fabric of the neighborhoods and city it serves. These partnerships include renting its gym for use by a neighborhood basketball program, hosting three local churches on their campuses for Sunday services, and housing a neighborhood daycare facility in one of the upper school’s wings. TCS has also opened its doors when its neighbors have faced challenges and tragedies, for example, by allowing a charter school to hold classes for the day when it lost heat in the middle of winter and facilitating collection of donations after a devastating fire in one of its elementary school’s neighborhoods.

Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy (CHCA) in Cincinnati, OH has an Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Program that is another example of how a school can grow alongside its community. Through the program, students and faculty organize entrepreneurial ventures that positively impact both the school and local community. Students learn about aeroponic, hydroponic, and soil-based growing systems in the on-campus greenhouse. Students both use the organic fruits and vegetables they grow in their teaching kitchen, as well as sell their produce to community businesses. In this way, the Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Program is more than just a business class: it is a robust initiative that combines innovation, real-life learning, leadership development, business and management skills, and environmental sustainability goals to train student leaders to serve their community, as well as a revenue generator that helps to keep the program running as well as provide seed

money for new projects.

Grand Rapids Christian Schools (GRCS) is a multi-campus school system with school buildings across Grand Rapids, Michigan. Each campus takes on a distinctive nature to meet the needs of its immediate community. The GRCS-Evergreen campus’s classrooms are multi-aged and use an “inquiry learning” pedagogical framework. The campus is also in the process of opening an Early Childhood Center for infants. The GRCS-Iroquois campus offers a Spanish immersion program, and the GRCS-Rockford campus offers outdoor and environmental education programs. The desire to grow with the local community is also reflected in their physical buildings. GRCS-Iroquois, its newest campus, was built on the site of a historic public high school. GRCS leaders engaged the community in the design process to ensure the building reflected the community’s values and history.

Many schools in our study demonstrated an admirable willingness to listen to as well as incorporate community feedback. CHCA’s entrepreneurship program is built on a “failing forward” mentality that incorporates feedback and student interest. While the teaching kitchen, greenhouse, and business incubators are successes, other businesses that have struggled have been discontinued. Similarly, LCS recently shuttered a longstanding recycling program, repurposing the recycling center to provide a multi-use space for the school’s growing CTE programs. Oaks Christian School (OCS) developed a separate student learning center that is available not only to students, but to community members who are interested in paying for the additional support. OCS also recently renovated dormitory space to create greater capacity to serve their international student population, which now includes 150 students representing 17 countries.

2.1.3. Inclusion

Furthermore, a school’s mission may be understood by the students a school intends to serve. Three historically underserved student groups in particular demonstrate a growth opportunity for Christian schools.

Socioeconomic inclusion is one of the greatest challenges facing Christian schools. As previously noted, the enrollment gap between high- and middle-income families in Christian schools is widening (Murnane et al., 2018), and need-based financial aid is often insufficient to cover the cost of tuition, particularly at larger schools (ACSI, 2021).

Schools in our study have adapted various strategies to make their schools more accessible financially. Some schools leverage strategic partnerships to reduce the cost of tuition. Chattanooga Christian School (CCS) operates microschools in historic churches throughout Chattanooga. By partnering with these churches, CCS eliminates the fixed costs associated with purchasing or building a new facility. CCS further reduces the price point of these microschools by providing marketing and back-office supporting, thus substantially reducing the cost of a CCS education. HA’s financial model reverses the traditional model in which schools rely on tuition to cover 90% or more of their expenses. Instead, HA relies on 400 partners contributing \$7500 each year to cover 90% of a student’s tuition. The strategy of relying many donors also minimizes the risk associated with relying on a small number of larger donors.

A second group of historically underserved students, families, and communities at Christian schools are those from racial or ethnic minorities. Several schools in this study have designated staff or committees tasked with supporting students of color, engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, and working collaboratively with faculty and students to make the school environment more inclusive for students of all backgrounds. This included a Director of Student Experience (VCHS), a Director of Diversity and Belonging (CHCA), and a diversity committee supported by an outside consultant (GRCS). TCS also engaged in a yearlong anti-racism and cultural sensitivity training program with all faculty and staff.

One final group of historically underserved students in Christian schools are students with disabilities. In the United States, approximately 2.6% of all private school students attend a private school with a special education program emphasis (Broughman et al., 2021). This is

likely a lower-bound estimate as private schools without a special education program emphasis enroll special education students as well. Fifteen percent of all public school students receive special education services, with the most common category being specific learning disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Although special education enrollments likely compose a smaller proportion of all private school enrollments, it is noteworthy that special education students in private schools tend to represent categories of disabilities that are costlier to educate (Greene and Winters, 2007; Parrish et al., 2015), and financial resources are often cited as a barrier for the inclusion of students with disabilities in Christian schools (Strater, 2021). As families increasingly turn to private schools for educational solutions for their children (Claypool and McLaughlin, 2017), inclusion of students with disabilities is an important sustainability consideration for private Christian schools as the decision to enroll in a Christian school may be an all-or-nothing proposition for families affected by disability, as many families affected by disability will choose to enroll all or none of their children in a Christian school (Dombrowski and Lee, 2021).

In an interview, GRCS's K-12 Director of Inclusion Services articulated the vision for special education and inclusion for GRCS in this way: "We're not whole if they're not here." GRCS utilizes a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), which allows students to move from tier to tier according to their particular needs. GRCS currently enrolls nearly 600 students receiving some level of learning support through their Education Support Services—roughly a quarter of their 2300 students. An additional 46 students receive inclusion services to accommodate a range of disabilities including cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, developmental delays, echolalia, emotional impairment, hearing impairment, non-verbal sensory processing disorder (NVLD), spina bifida, and vision impairment. GRCS employs a policy of tuition equity—not charging additional fees for inclusion services beyond the school's regular tuition. To achieve this policy, the special education budget is calculated at the school level rather than the student level, allowing costs associated with additional services to be shared by the entire school community, rather than imposed on the students needing those supports. This policy follows the vision that special education is integral to the mission of Christian education.

CCS shares GRCS' emphasis on inclusion of students with disabilities in Christian education. In order to serve students with more exceptional needs, CCS built The Learning Center, a 3900 + square foot facility on campus that meets students' needs in partnership with the Siskin Children's Institute (SCI), which offers consultation and integrated therapy services. The partnership is supported by a donor who shared the vision for establishing an innovative special education center in Chattanooga. Tuition equity is achieved through Tennessee's Individualized Education Accounts program, which enables families to take their child's Basic Education Program (BEP) dollars to a local private school that better serves their needs. BEP allocations vary from district to district, but average roughly \$7000 per year—approximately the per-student cost of additional services through The Learning Center.

Results from our quantitative analysis affirm the importance of inclusion to perceived school sustainability. Our survey analysis identified that "Supporting underserved students" is positively and significantly associated with greater optimism that the school will be both open and more accessible in ten years. "Welcoming" significantly associated with "more accessible" with demographic controls, but not in models with no covariates. "Innovative access" was significantly associated with "more accessible" in models with no covariates, but not in models with respondent controls. We estimate that agreeing more strongly that one's school supports underserved students by one standard deviation was associated with a 0.25 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be open in ten years, and with 0.18–0.19 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be more accessible in ten years. (See Table 5.)

Table 5
Commitment to access and respondent optimism.

	Open		More Accessible	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Expanding access	0.07 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)
Shared vision	0.217 (0.06)	0.302 (0.06)	0.273 (0.05)	0.320 (0.05)
Innovative access	0.173 (0.06)	0.214 (0.06)	0.598 (0.05)	0.592 (0.05)
Welcoming	0.08 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.14 (0.05)	0.12 (0.05)
Support underserved students	0.169 (0.05)	0.155 (0.05)	0.009 * (0.05)	0.021 (0.05)
Controls	0.05 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.13 (0.05)	0.14 (0.05)
Role	0.350 (0.05)	0.421 (0.05)	0.010 (0.05)	0.008 * (0.05)
Experience	0.25 (0.05)	0.25 (0.05)	0.18 (0.05)	0.19 (0.05)
n	0.000 * 523	0.000 * 523	0.000 * 526	0.000 * 526

Notes. Standard errors reported in parentheses. *p*-values reported below standard errors. * *p* < 0.01.

2.2. Theme 2: structures and practices

Many school organizations in our study utilized innovative structural models in order to promote their school or system's financial sustainability. Structural innovations include school choice and public resources, mergers, online programs, and systems. Here we highlight the practices of seven schools.

2.2.1. School choice and public resources

Valley Christian Schools (VCS) was founded in 1975 as Youngstown Christian School with the vision of enrolling students of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds. A capital campaign allowed the school to build a high school in downtown Youngstown, OH, which opened in 2006 with only 86 students—not nearly enough to sustain the school. At the same time the high school opened, Ohio's Educational Choice Scholarship Program was introduced statewide, which provides scholarships for students at low-performing public schools and from families under an income threshold to attend a participating private school of their choice. The decision to participate in the program was guided by the school's long-term missional outlook; Reichard (2012) concluded that tuition-paying parents and voucher parents were statistically similar in terms of religiosity. VCS enrolls families with 80% of their tuition paid through the Ohio EdChoice Scholarship Program; currently, the school educates more than 700 students at four campuses, with a 92% retention rate across all grades.

In keeping with our qualitative findings on adaptability around structures and functions, "Change" and "Community" are positively and significantly associated with greater optimism that the school will be both open and more accessible in ten years. We estimate that agreeing more strongly that one's school welcomes change by one standard deviation was associated with 0.15–0.16 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be open in ten years and 0.25–0.26 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be more accessible in ten years. (See Table 6.)

HOPE (Hold Onto the Promises Everywhere) Christian Schools (HCS) is part of a larger organization known as Open Sky Education (OSE), which operates six schools in the Milwaukee area with plans to open another three middle schools in the near future, thereby helping make Christian education possible for nearly 3500 students participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. OSE also operates charter schools in Arizona, with a wrap-around faith-based character education program available at a fraction of the cost of full tuition.

Table 6
Openness to change and respondent optimism.

	Open		More Accessible	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Risk-taking	0.05 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.12 (0.05)	0.11 (0.05)
Feedback	0.372 (0.05)	0.522 (0.05)	0.012 (0.05)	0.023 (0.05)
Change	0.011 (0.05)	0.011 (0.05)	0.525 (0.05)	0.811 (0.05)
Observations	0.15 (0.05)	0.16 (0.05)	0.25 (0.05)	0.26 (0.05)
Community	0.004 * (0.05)	0.002 * (0.05)	0.000 * (0.05)	0.000 * (0.05)
Controls	0.05 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Role	0.332	0.281	0.215	0.196
Experience	0.14 (0.05)	0.13 (0.05)	0.12 (0.04)	0.12 (0.05)
n	0.003 * 510	0.005 * 509	0.006 * 511	0.006 * 510

Notes. Standard errors reported in parentheses. *p*-values reported below standard errors. * *p* < 0.01.

Other public resources are available for private Christian schools. The Ohio Department of Education, for example, allocates per-pupil auxiliary funds for students enrolled in nonpublic schools, which can be used to reimburse schools for the purchase of educational resources and services. Over the years, CHCA has used the Auxiliary Services Program to help support many of their programs, including nearly \$130,000 of culinary equipment used to support their student test kitchen. Other funds are designated to benefit specific categories of students. Tennessee’s Individualized Education Accounts program, mentioned in the previous section, supports students with exceptional needs, allowing CCS to maintain a policy of tuition equity.

2.2.2. Mergers, online programs, and systems

The Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg (CSAGH) was founded in 2017 when Harrisburg Christian School (founded in 1955) acquired West Shore Christian Academy (founded in 1973), two schools around Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The two campuses reside on opposite sides of the Susquehanna River and thus serve two distinct neighborhoods, allowing CSAGH to be more responsive to community growth. The merger allows two schools to take advantage of economies of scale as one system, including shared board and leadership expertise, as well as the capacity to hire dedicated staff in finance and administration, curricular development, instructional technology, and professional development. These developments have helped the school grow its enrollment to 770 students and achieve a level of unprecedented financial health in either school’s history.

Oaks Christian School’s (OCS) mission, to “dedicate ourselves to Christ in the pursuit of academic excellence, artistic expression, and athletic distinction while growing in knowledge and wisdom through God’s abundant grace,” was developed through a collaborative and iterative process in which the school also identified its three pillars: “academic excellence, artistic expression, and athletic distinction, built upon a biblical worldview and Christ-centered foundation.” OCS’ mission clarity enabled a willingness to change its programs to meet its mission, for example by creating academic institutes in global leadership, arts and innovation, and engineering, as well as a new structural innovation, Oaks Christian Online, which serves over 700 students on at least a part-time basis. Oaks Christian Online helps make an OCS education accessible for more families; rather than cannibalizing on-campus student enrollment, OCS has found the program enables them to meet the needs of a distinct student population. Students may be interested in Oaks Christian Online for its flexibility (operated 95% asynchronous and

5% synchronous), affordability (a quarter of in-person tuition), or supplemental coursework offerings.

2.3. Theme 3: community engagement

Finally, partnering with community resources is another way in which schools can sustain their mission. Here we highlight the practices of four schools.

OCS partners with high-level experts in the area to serve as advisors for their three academic institutes (global leadership, arts and innovation, engineering). For example, a University of Southern California professor and advisory board member co-designed a business class. Partnerships with Spotify and Skype help OCS teachers and students to build classes in virtual reality. These local partnerships are even reshaping OCS campus facilities. OCS acquired and transformed a former dog food production facility to become their 10,000 square-foot innovation space, called the Innovation, Design, Engineering, and Aeronautics (IDEA) Lab, a space students use to build electric cars, design robotics, and utilize 3-D printing. This innovative space has led to a partnership with the nearby Jet Propulsion Laboratories.

As previously discussed, HA utilizes a unique funding model that relies on partners to fund 90% of a student’s educational expenses, with the final 10% covered by tuition. HA employs numerous strategies to intentionally partner with families. The school hosts a number of family-involvement days when parents have the opportunity to visit classes. Every October, the school offers a ninety-minute training session in technology, cultural harmony, and trauma-informed parenting to equip parents to support students. Financial partners are also paired with students and families and develop meaningful relationships.

Churches are natural partners in Christian education and may provide an opportunity for Christian schools to expand their reach while minimizing costs. One model for achieving this growth may be through microschools. CCS has also grown alongside the racial and ethnic diversification of Chattanooga; over the past five years, CCS school leaders have worked with community leaders to develop neighborhood microschools, hosted in historical churches throughout the city, to offer an affordable CCS education in economically depressed neighborhoods. By partnering with churches to use their facilities, CCS can open new educational sites quickly while avoiding the up-front costs of securing or building a new facility.

Twenty miles from most of CHCA’s campuses lies its Armlerder campus, housed in the historic Crosley Square Building in downtown Cincinnati. Armlerder thrives in part because of key strategic partnerships with community groups and resources. One of these organizations is the Talbert House, a nonprofit organization founded in 1965 with the mission of “empowering children, adults and families to live healthy, safe and productive lives.” Through this partnership, Talbert House provides services for CHCA students with social-emotional needs.

Our survey analysis affirms our qualitative findings about the connection between strong relationships, both with the surrounding community and within a school community, and optimism. We estimate that agreeing more strongly that a school seeks feedback from the community by one standard deviation was associated with 0.13–0.14 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be open in ten years and 0.12 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be more accessible in ten years. (See Table 6.)

The perceived quality of relationships within a school community is also positively and significantly associated with greater optimism that the school will be both open and more accessible in ten years. Good working relationships with administrators associated with greater optimism that the school will be both open and more accessible. Good working relationships with teachers associated with greater optimism that the school will be open (robust across specifications) and associated with greater optimism that the school will be more accessible, but only when controlling for demographic characteristics. We estimate that agreeing more strongly regarding the quality of teacher relationships by

one standard deviation was associated with 0.16–0.19 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be open in ten years. We also estimate that agreeing more strongly regarding the quality of administrator relationships by one standard deviation was associated with 0.22–0.24 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be open in ten years and 0.20–0.22 standard deviations greater optimism that the school would be more accessible in ten years. (See Table 7.).

3. Discussion

Our qualitative analysis yielded that a school's mission, connection to the community, and inclusive vision were all related to the sustainable and innovative practices it adopted. With respect to mission, having a clear mission, being committed to the mission, and taking a long-term outlook helped schools innovative adaptively in ways that enabled each to better fulfill its mission and vision. Developing a strong partnership with the community, responding to community growth, and seeking community feedback were ways in which schools in our study were able to stay relevant. Finally, these schools demonstrated many ways in which it is possible to pursue practices inclusive of historically underserved student populations that simultaneously boost the school's prospect of financial sustainability and long-term growth.

Many of our quantitative findings confirmed what we observed in focus group interviews and site visits. With respect to community partnerships, welcoming change and seeking community feedback were among the factors most strongly associated with respondents' optimism that their school would be open and more accessible in ten years. Supporting underserved students was also positively and significantly associated with respondent optimism, robust across all model specifications. Finally, strong relationships with other teachers and especially with administrators correlated with respondent optimism that the school would continue to sustain its mission into the future.

4. Conclusions

Financial school sustainability is one of the greatest challenges facing the private Christian school sector today. Despite evidence that innovative school practices are positively associated with school effectiveness, little research has been conducted to identify innovative practices and structural models that may help to sustain the mission of Christian education into the future. Our study provides insight into sustainable and innovative practices and models in Christian education, featuring 11 Christian schools and systems across the United States.

In our qualitative research using an appreciative inquiry framework, our interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis yield nine themes under three broad headings: *mission and culture*; *structures and practices*; and *community engagement*. For the quantitative portion of our study, we survey 553 administrators, teachers, support staff, board members, and other members of these 11 school communities. Using principal components analysis, we identify four components for our analysis: commitment to access, openness to change, quality of relationships, and optimism. Across the two studies, we find compelling evidence that the practices identified may prove to be effective strategies for Christian schools.

Caution against mimicking these practices in any school context is warranted. A qualitative AI framework is helpful for identifying what is possible, but not necessarily what is probable for Christian schools. The 11 schools and systems in our study implement unique practices and models, but collectively demonstrate how school mission, community relationships, and inclusive policies can be part of a sustainable strategic plan. Nonetheless, they implement these practices in ways that are unique to their models and contexts. Likewise, school administrators and board members should carefully consider how to adapt these practices, while making expedient use of their own unique knowledge of their immediate school community. Additionally, use of the AI

Table 7
Quality of relationships and respondent optimism.

	Open		More accessible	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Teacher relationships	0.16 (0.05) 0.002 *	0.19 (0.05) 0.000 *	0.12 (0.05) 0.024	0.15 (0.05) 0.005 *
Administrator relationships	0.24 (0.05) 0.000 *	0.22 (0.05) 0.000 *	0.22 (0.05) 0.000 *	0.20 (0.05) 0.000 *
<i>Controls</i>				
Role		X		X
Experience		X		X
n	530	529	531	530

Notes. Standard errors reported in parentheses. *p*-values reported below standard errors. * *p* < 0.01.

framework (or any qualitative framework) prevents the researchers from making definitive claims about the linkages between innovative practices identified and the actual probability of long-term sustainability for the schools in the sample. Longitudinal research to monitor these schools into the future would enable theory-testing and subsequent revision of assumptions about the mechanisms of school sustainability.

More research is needed to identify other best practices related to financial sustainability in Christian education, particularly in the future, as the education sector writ large in the United States continues to innovate new models of schooling (Wearne and Thompson, 2022). Furthermore, research should consider evaluating the effectiveness of various strategies and approaches. For example, a prospective study in which newly established schools are measured according to some of the practices and models identified in this study, and tracked longitudinally for growth, may provide further evidence of the effectiveness and generalizability of these practices.

Finally, our study provides new evidence that private Christian schools in diverse settings are engaging in innovative practices and models to address long-term sustainability. While these approaches are not yet widespread (Van der Walt and Zecha, 2004; Swaner and Lee, 2020; ACSI, 2021), these exemplars point to the possibility for adaptive yet missional change across the sector—which, in turn, can help to ensure the sustainability of Christian education into the future.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lynn Swaner: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Jon Eckert:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Erik Ellefsen:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. **Matthew Lee:** Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing.

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