

for REACH Indicator 7.8, Exemplary 5A

Introduction

One of the questions we receive often is: *“How should we do spiritual formation assessment?”* Sometimes that question is worded very specifically and with a challenge: *“How do you expect us to measure something that is internal, that you can’t see?”* Some schools go as far as to say that they don’t even think it is their role or their right to try.

In this white paper, we want to discuss this concept and hopefully give schools a new perspective on what we are asking as well as provide some age-appropriate strategies for assessing spiritual formation.

Let’s begin with a discussion of what this accreditation standard is really asking for. The statement below is from the *REACH Accreditation Protocol*. All schools that are accredited by ACSI use some version of this protocol.

Indicator 7.8 *Assessment of the spiritual development of students is intentionally included in the ongoing evaluation of the school’s effectiveness in formally measuring its schoolwide expected student outcomes.*

First, notice that the concept is “the spiritual development of students.” When we look at how spiritual development will be assessed, we will be looking for growth, development, and a maturity of understanding. This is not a test of spirituality or a test to judge if students are Christians or not. That is often what teachers or administrators think and therefore resist. The word “development” was specifically chosen.

The next part about “intentionally included in the ongoing evaluation of the school’s effectiveness” was written so that schools would make an effort to look at how they are doing in the intangible or non-academic areas, such as spiritual growth, and not only in the more easily measured areas, such as academics. When we get to the part where we give examples, it will be easier to understand how this can occur. The concept here is that schools must realize that if they commit themselves to the spiritual development of students, they also need to periodically check on how that is progressing. We’ll talk about what they should do with those results in a later section. Keep in mind the word “effectiveness.” That is included to help the school accept the responsibility that if they make claims about spiritual growth and outcomes for students, they also have a responsibility to see how those are progressing.

Next, let’s look at the word “formally.” To some schools that has meant an objective test or something that they purchase from a third-party vendor. That was not our intention. A formal process could also be something that the school does on a regular basis, for all students, with benchmarks, analysis, and a process for intervention if the school sees that a group or individuals are struggling. When we give examples of what that process could look like, you will see that there are several options. The word “formally” describes that it is a regular and well-defined part of the school’s assessment process.

Lastly, let’s look at what these assessments are tied to. The answer is the school’s Expected Student Outcomes. Hopefully, schools understand the importance of these. However, as a review, these Outcomes are a guiding set of priorities or clear distinctives targeted by the school. They represent the combined commitment of the school and faculty that regardless of the subject or grade level, there are

some overriding Outcomes that the entire school is working toward to accomplish in students' lives by the time students exit their division and ultimately the school. These Outcomes are also a pact that the school is making with the parents every time a student is enrolled or re-enrolled. It is one of the main reasons why that parent pays thousands of dollars for that faith-based private education and why they don't just use the free public or charter school down the street that might have several great Christian teachers. These Outcomes usually have several spiritual Outcomes in terms of faith, character, and possibly others such as service, heart for the poor, spiritual disciplines, and development of a biblical worldview. In a school where these have been properly integrated into the curriculum, they are actually written into the instructional program so that teachers know which ones they are responsible for. They have woven them into activities and assessments. The administrators can map all those Outcomes, throughout all grades offered by the school, in order to see that these Outcomes are periodically covered, and teachers own them as part of their instruction.

### Assessment Part 1 - Collection

Let's get to some examples so that this makes more sense.

What if one of your Expected Student Outcomes is...*develops, articulates, and defends a biblical worldview*? How do you assess that? First, notice that we don't use the word "measure." These are not something that we measure. If this is one of the three or four Outcomes that the English 10 teacher is responsible for, then he or she has probably figured out to which instructional activity it belongs. Schools often have teachers look at the Outcomes the school has identified and figure out where they fit best. Once that Outcome is assigned to one or two grades/courses in elementary, one in Middle School, and one or two in High School, then it should probably stay there for a while. One of the components of assessments is year over year comparisons.

Thinking about the English 10 teacher, she might look at what would be the second of four assignments during the year that connect with this assessment. She might say to the students, "In your analysis of this piece of literature, identify the worldview that you believe is depicted here by one of the main characters." (Assume they have identified several worldviews in Bible class prior to this.) She might also ask them to include their own thoughts on that worldview. Depending on the school's student body (e.g., covenant vs. more evangelical) the teacher may ask students to share some scripture that relates, as well. The teacher should provide a rubric so that students know what level of analysis is required, level of personal reflection required, etc. This paper becomes an *assessment* or Part 1 of this process. The student is not graded on where they are in their spiritual journey. They are graded on whether or not they met the rubric requirements (identify, explain, illustrate, analyze, maybe compare and contrast).

### Assessment Part 2 - Analysis

There are two additional parts that are also important. Part 2 is a compilation and analysis task for the teacher. She is going to collect those papers and note the responses that students gave her. She will include that in her *Assessment Report* for the year. Assuming this is the second assessment on this particular Outcome, she may see growth in how the students are able to understand worldviews and how they are able to explain their own understanding of the worldview in the story. Her simple analysis might be that there is growth for a third or half of the class. However, she might also note that two or three of the students are really struggling to understand what a worldview is or how they feel about this particular worldview (identifying significant differences between Christian and anti-Christian thought).

### Assessment Part 3 – Follow Up

Part 3 is the follow-up for that teacher. If the class is growing and developing as expected, then the teacher simply continues through the instructional activities as planned. If that is not the case for the whole class, then she knows that she may need to reteach some aspect. If only two to three students are struggling individually, then she knows she needs to do some intervention with them. It may be on the English/grammar side (putting into words what they are trying to say) or it may actually be in what they are expressing. They may be confused or just not quite sure what the character was struggling with. They may also be grappling with that themselves. This gives the teacher a wonderful one-on-one opportunity to follow up and mentor that young person. It starts with the assignment, of course, but the assessment provides an opportunity to help that student grow or at least articulate some doubts that may be plaguing them.

Part 3 also includes the development of a portfolio, or a record of the student's growth. For the following year, as students move from one teacher to another, a written history is created of the journey that student is on. In many schools now, a student that is struggling or doubting just slides unnoticed into the next grade and no one is aware of their thoughts. With a portfolio of spiritual development, the school has an "intentional" way of noticing and shepherding students through their spiritual journey. These are considered internal or informal assessments.

### More Examples, Multiple Grade Levels

Some schools have an Outcome related to service and missions, and possibly meeting the needs of the poor. In the past, eighth grade students at ABC Christian school have gone out into the community to rake leaves and generally clean up lawns for older citizens in a poor area of the neighborhood each fall. They have fun, come back for cider and cookies, and call it a day. Once the school started doing *assessments* of its Outcomes, the teacher asked them to journal once a week about what Jesus says about poor people and what our reactions should be toward them. This went on for a month prior to the work in the community. The first week, verses were written out, comments were short and shallow, and sharing was brief. The second and third week, the sharing started to increase. By the fourth week, students had discovered through their online searching how many verses there are about the poor and how many times Jesus himself speaks about our responsibility toward them. Students asked for more time to write and the sharing went on much past the time allotted.

By the time the students went to the neighboring homes and helped out, the experience was substantially different than it had been in the past. When they came back, the students also journaled and shared, and it went on for the majority of the class period. They also completed a short self-evaluation (a simple rubric) with their final journal reflection. This happened year after year. The teacher did the same two additional steps that were listed above. Part 2 was a class analysis for the *Assessment Report*. The teacher did Part 3 which was a follow-up with the class or individuals that seemed to struggle with these concepts, again providing meaningful conversations.

The next example is for elementary students. One Outcome we've seen is something like...*understands the gospel, salvation, and how to present that to others or pursues a personal relationship with Christ*. Let's look at how a teacher might teach and assess those in elementary through middle school.

In the elementary grades, maybe grades 2 and 5, the teacher may have an instructional activity in Bible class where the student learns the plan of salvation and then demonstrates their knowledge of that. In

second grade, it might be the bracelet or bookmark that has five colors. The student might create the item and then share that with a small group or whole class. For the fifth-grade student, they might have memorized parts of verses that connect with each part of those five points and they might use a poster as they explain why each of these points are important to the gospel story. The fifth graders might even choose different hypothetical audiences and indicate to whom they would be presenting this information. For both activities, the teacher would have a simple rubric that allows them to mark the student as to their understanding of the concepts. For the fifth grader, a follow-up entry in a journal might be appropriate such as “Today’s journal entry will give you an opportunity to write about your journey with Jesus. If you know that Jesus is your Savior, you can write about that. If you are still thinking about that, you can write about your questions. If you are not sure you are interested, you can write about your thoughts.” These journal entries become part of the portfolio that has been growing from their time at the school. It demonstrates the growth and development of their spiritual formation while they have been a student at the school.

An eighth-grade activity could take the form of a research paper and personal testimony. Each student could research their church’s position on their understanding of salvation and the verses they use to share the gospel. Then they could be asked to write out their personal testimony to present to the high school principal as they prepare to enter the high school. For many high schools, an individual interview is part of the entry process to the high school, even if the student has attended the same school through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. As the student studies the claims of Christ and prepares their own testimony, it will provide the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Bible teacher a wonderful opportunity to meet individually with each student and talk through any doubts or questions they may have about their personal relationship with Christ.

As a student prepares to move from elementary school to middle school, or middle school to high school, depending on the student body, it might be helpful to know which students have made a commitment of faith, and which are not ready to do so. Remembering our *Part 2 Assessment Report*, after reading through those journals or testimonies, the teacher can give an estimate of how many of the fifth or eighth graders fall into the various categories he/she has created and uses every year. Part 3, as you will remember, allows the teacher to do some follow-up. If many students in the class have a question, like “How could a loving God condemn people to Hell?” then the teacher knows what to cover or review. If one or two students have individual questions, then the teacher knows how to help them with their questions. This becomes the spiritual mentoring that is so valuable in the Christian school. In schools that have taken this approach, students have received Christ because of the intentional one-on-one conversations that naturally occur in these settings. PTL!

### Objective Assessments

Occasionally we are asked about the objective assessment of biblical integration and if that can become part of spiritual formation assessment. Yes, it certainly can. Following are a couple of examples.

Hopefully, every unit has some biblical integration that addresses the content of what is being taught. One example might come from a concept taught in a social studies class. During a unit, a teacher may teach the history concepts and discuss how a war or other event in the time period was significantly motivated by self-interest. Scripture and personal examples would be shared and explained as motivators of behavior. When it comes time for the unit exam, the student may be asked to take a historical event (several options provided) in a short essay question and explain how this event was motivated by self-interest. The rubric for grading that essay question might require the inclusion of a biblical principle. This could also relate to subjects like avoiding copyrights in computer class (illegal music or software sharing sites), or genetic manipulation in science class, etc. The teacher has to be

careful not to require that the student say that they believe a certain way on these exercises. They can, however, ask the student to discuss the moral dilemma from a Christian perspective or provide a Christian point of view. That is something that can be learned. It is appropriate for a school to require that the student learn the Christian argument. It is not appropriate for a school to grade a student in a way that requires them to express a view as their own that they may not believe, to get full credit.

Another example may be from some simple class functions, or processes which support learning. One Outcome that we have often seen is some form of this...*is able to relate well and work well with others, respects the worth of every individual as made in God's image*. This is manifested in students being able to work together in groups. When a teacher has students work in groups, whether that be elementary, middle school, or high school, they can develop and learn that certain group etiquette applies (sharing materials, listening, showing respect, taking turns, collaborating, doing your assigned work). These rules can be true across the board at the school or perhaps throughout a subject, like math. Once those rules are taught and reinforced, students can be assessed on them as well. Whenever group work is used, students can be asked to assess their own and their group's behavior with a simple rubric. Then perhaps four times a year, the teacher can collect those rubrics and do the analysis we've described for Part 2 and Part 3 (see above). Through this, biblical principles of how we treat one another when we work in groups is taught, implemented, and assessed on a regular basis. A few times a year, these assessments would also be collected and be used as part of the *Assessment Report* that is analyzed and used to develop improvement strategies.

The examples given are provided to get you thinking about ways that you can take your Expected Student Outcomes and work them into assessments. There are many other ways that work as well. What is important is that first, you develop a common language and system for your staff so that they are all using a similar format (like the three Parts). Second, create expectations so that everyone works on this together. An example of that would be to require that teachers accept the challenge to create one or two assessments the first year and implement those at least twice. Then build from there the second and third years so that eventually all Outcomes are covered (not necessarily at every grade level). Another example would be that all teachers should document these into their course maps so that whether they teach a particular course the following year or someone else does, the assessment will be given, and the results collected and analyzed. The third important step would be to start small but assemble these results into a larger *Assessment Report* for various divisions (ES, MS, and HS) and review those results year over year. It is in looking at how those results compare and what they show each teacher and the division head, that will suggest improvement strategies. This will start making a difference in the accomplishment of these essential Outcomes.

## Conclusion

In summary, it is important that spiritual formation assessment is:

- developmental, focused on growth and maturity, not judging students
- for the purpose of seeing students achieve the spiritual Outcomes
- analyzed and used for program improvement, both at the whole class and individual level.

The school ought to be just as committed to achieving their non-academic Outcomes as they are the typical academic Outcomes of math, English/language arts, science, and social studies. All Expected Student Outcomes are a commitment to parents, almost a pact between the school and the parents, that they will achieve these Outcomes in the lives of the students to the best of their ability. The school compiles and analyzes these results, so they know where they are succeeding and where they need to spend more time, attention, and reteaching when appropriate. Once teachers see that certain

instructional activities are effectively accomplishing the Outcomes and others are not having the same impact, they look for ways to improve their results. Data is powerful in the hands of good teachers. **Assessing the spiritual formation of students will yield demonstrable results and give teachers the tools they need to meet the needs of their students.**

### Notes for Exemplary Schools

For Exemplary Schools, there is a higher standard for assessing the spiritual side of the school's Expected Student Outcomes, as one might expect. Critical Factor 5A from the ACSI Exemplary Schools Protocol states:

*The school conducts internal and external formative and summative assessments at least every other year of the spiritual climate of the school. It utilizes this data to adjust its programs and policies in order to impact the lives of students and provide a culture where faith development flourishes.*

One question we receive often centers on what constitutes 'external summative assessments.' These involve a third-party to help the school compare their results with benchmarks from other schools or expectations that have been provided from a group of schools. Most don't use the word "norms" in this case because most of these third-party products have not used large enough sample sizes or research-based methodologies that would rise to that level. However, they have implemented their assessments with groups of schools across the United States and have provided the results for valuable comparisons. It is helpful to use these third-party measures for several years or periodically (like every other year) and this can provide a way to identify strengths and areas for spiritual growth.

When the school aligns their goals or curriculum to the objectives to a particular spiritual formation assessment tool, the school may ascertain that the assessment may not fit well. They may decide to supplement the assessment with internal assessments, or more of a portfolio approach, as was described in the earlier part of the paper. Other schools have used one or more third-party assessments and then developed their own, better aligned to their goals. These may be partially objective and contain internal or informal assessments. The informal assessment portions tend to be criterion-referenced or more reflective like the portfolio approach. A combination of these seems to work well. However, it is crucial to remember that assessments are always just the first step. As was described earlier in the paper, collecting the information is not the most important step. Following up with that information with students, whole classes, and program improvement far outshines the simple collection of the assessment data.

In the research completed for the *Flourishing Schools Culture Inventory*, the creators collected Expected Student Outcomes from the original 64 schools that participated. (FSCI website below, see 2019 National Report.) As you can see from these results, many schools acknowledge that the spiritual formation of their students is key, and essential to target in the lives of their graduates. There are spiritual aspects in many areas; not just the one labeled 'spiritual.' The question becomes, how do we assess these areas of growth? Most schools would agree that some are easier than others. Some are heart level commitments and others are the outworking of those commitments.

SPIRITUAL	ACADEMIC	COMMUNITY	EXCELLENCE	IMPACT	SERVANTHOOD
✓ Spiritual Formation	✓ Reading	✓ Relationships	✓ Body as temple of Holy Spirit	✓ Impact the world for Christ	✓ Serve Christ
✓ Relationship with Jesus	✓ Writing	✓ Partnerships	✓ Responsibility	✓ Change the world through the Holy Spirit	✓ Serve Others
✓ Christian Worldview	✓ Speaking	✓ Families	✓ Skill Development	✓ Use gifts to influence the world	✓ Humility
✓ Empowered by Holy Spirit	✓ Math	✓ Friendships	✓ Integrity	✓ Leadership	✓ Good stewardship of time, talent, and treasure
✓ Visible fruit of the Spirit	✓ Science	✓ Social/Civic	✓ Dignity in work	✓ Great Commission	✓ Willingness to work hard
	✓ History		✓ Mark of Christian life		✓ Outreach activities
	✓ Wisdom				✓ Serve family and community
	✓ Critical Thinking				
	✓ Problem-Solving				
	✓ Research				
	✓ Lifelong Learning				
63 schools	63 schools	54 schools	52 schools	41 schools	31 schools

**Table 1.** Meta-Analysis of Christian Schools' Expected Student Outcomes (ESOs)

The second question we receive is about the term “spiritual climate” in the Exemplary indicator. This acknowledges that spiritual growth in students is not simply a function of what students learn but is also dependent on the total experience of that student in the school. Who students see as role models, what service experiences they are involved in, and relationships within the community all affect spiritual growth. Very few surveys capture that broader view. The Flourishing Schools Culture Inventory is an instrument that can be used to assess some of those school-culture level conditions that affect the development of spiritual formation in students. For more information, see the reference below.

For some additional options for third-party spiritual assessments that schools have used, see the bibliography below. ACSI does not endorse any of these because what is most important is the fit between an assessment and your schools desired outcomes. As stated earlier, the most significant aspect of the process is what your school does with the information it gathers. If you have one that you find works well in your school, please share it with us at [accreditation@acsi.org](mailto:accreditation@acsi.org). Also be sure to share it in the Accreditation Group in the [Online Community](#). Others would love to hear about your experience.

Stay tuned to ACSI’s ongoing research. We are developing a *Flourishing Faith Index* to help schools in this important and complex area.

### References

Christian Character Index: <http://www.assess-yourself.org/>

Engaged Schools (The Global Student Assessment): <https://www.wheatonpress.com/global-student-assessment.html>

Flourishing Schools Culture Inventory <https://www.acsi.org/professional-development/flourishing-schools-institute/flourishing-schools-home>

LifeWay Spiritual Growth Assessment: <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/women-leadership-spiritual-gifts-growth-service>

Spiritual Transformation Inventory: <https://www.spiritualtransformation.org/>