

Measuring Our Christian Mission

A Van Lunen Project - July 2014

by Jim McKenzie, Principal

The Rock School – Gainesville, FL

Google the search term “Christian school mission statement” and take a few minutes to read through the results. What you will discover is that Christian schools across the country are largely committed to the same basic ideals, including:

- Seeking to glorify God through the training and nurturing of students
- Providing a Christ-centered education based on biblical truth
- Encouraging the formation of the character of God within the student
- Developing a worldview that will impact the world for Christ
- Providing a nurturing environment and a quality education
- Equipping students to become leaders to serve God and their families
- Enriching the spiritual lives of its students through quality academic programs and extra-curricular activities
- Teaching a Biblical worldview of life in a Christ-centered environment
- Helping students know and honor Jesus Christ
- Incorporating God's truth and wisdom in all disciplines

This vast sampling of mission statements can be reasonably summarized by this somewhat typical mission statement from a school in Texas: “Providing children with quality, Christ-centered education, developing students who strive for academic excellence and molding responsible citizens to embrace a distinctly Christian worldview.”

For years, Christian school leaders have wrestled with the task of crafting the right mission and vision statement, carefully constructing a message that would resonate with our parents and students, and then strategically placing it in our literature and on our website. Once complete, the statement took its place on the wall in the school entry and on the first pages of our Student Handbook, but then what?

Every day when I walk in to my school, I am greeted by our school’s mission statement prominently displayed. More importantly, though, as I stand in front of it, I am forced to wrestle with the most important question of the day – Are we meeting our mission? And how do I know?

The pat response is to answer quickly and say, “Of course we are meeting our mission. Enriching the spiritual lives of students? We have chapel each week. Check. Teaching a Biblical worldview? Bible class. Done. Incorporating God’s truth in all disciplines? We only hire Christian teachers. So yeah.”

The problem with many Christian school mission statements is that it focuses on attributes – things the school is going to do or be – instead of zeroing in on student outcomes – what students will look, act, and sound like when they leave our schools.

I attended a business training several years ago, and one of the key takeaways was this: What gets measured, gets done. Having a Christ-centered education is easy. Have prayer. Buy Christian textbooks. Graduating students who have a mature worldview rooted in Scripture? Not so easy to check off the to-do list.

As Christian educators, we know how to measure academic success. We have a whole battery of assessments at our disposal – everything from unit tests to national norm-referenced standardized test – that we can use to ensure that students are achieving mastery in reading, writing, and mathematics. After all, what gets measured, gets done.

But what about the Christian distinctives of our school? The things that make us different from all of the other educational options parents are exploring? The core values that make our mission unique and motivate us to get up and go to work everyday? Are we meeting our mission? And how do we know?

Dan Smithwick of the Nehemiah Institute has been studying the worldview of Christian teens since 1988. His findings are rather alarming. Through an assessment called the PEERS test, Smithwick has been tracking the scores of Christian youth in the areas of politics, economics, education, religion, and social issues. In 1988, the average score of church-going youth was a 50, a worldview defined by Smithwick as a “moderate Christian.” (The range of 70-100 is considered true biblical theism.) In 2012, the average score had plummeted to less than 5, a reflection of the humanistic and socialistic views of today’s secular society.

Even more disturbing is that there is very little distinction between Christian youth who attend public schools and the youth who are enrolled in a traditional Christian school. (Christian school students still scored less than 15 in 2012).

If nearly every Christian school’s mission statement, website, or marketing literature expresses a commitment to “developing a biblical worldview,” why do these average scores of more than 1000 schools show such little effect?

Because what gets measured, gets done.

In my work with Graceworks Ministries, I have the opportunity to travel and provide consulting services to other Christian schools in the areas of marketing and enrollment growth. Most recently, I visited a school that I think provides an interesting case study for this discussion.

As part of the consulting services, the school gives its parents a robust survey tool called the Parent Satisfaction and Referral Survey (PSRS v. 4.0). This particular school had very high parent satisfaction with scores that ranked them in the top ten percent nationally. However, what was most striking was the list of what parents valued most. One of the strengths of the survey is to measure the importance and effectiveness of forty program elements found within a Christian school. Here are the top eight elements in order of importance to parents at this school:

1. Academically competent teachers
2. Teachers exhibit care and concern for students

3. Safe learning environment
4. Engaging teaching
5. Students are well-prepared for the next educational level
6. Facility allows for adequate learning environment
7. High academic standards for students
8. Curriculum up-to-date

At first glance, these seem like exactly what a school would want to see at the top of the list. But let's contrast that with what parents said were the eight least important program elements at this Christian school:

33. Teachers are Christian role models

34. Staff is customer service oriented

35. Christian environment

36. Student admission standards
37. Results of standardized tests

38. Bible / Religion curriculum

39. School Board oversight
40. Significant financial aid is available

Remember, parents at this school are highly satisfied and even though these elements ranked low in importance, parents still rated the school high for effectiveness in these areas. By the parents' accounts, the school does all of these things reasonably well.

So why is this school facing a declining enrollment pattern if they are effective and parents are satisfied? Because they've lost their distinctiveness. At nearly every grade level from grades 2-8, the school has an attrition problem each year because families don't re-enroll their children, deciding instead to send them to a local charter school or magnet program (Fundamental schools, they're called in this area). Reviewing the strengths of this school, we see that they are the same qualities that a family can find *for free* at a local public or charter school. The culture of the school doesn't do enough to promote the Christian distinctives that make the school different, so it's not hard for parents to walk away.

The school has been very intentional about its academic programs. They are very proud of their student's test scores, cognitive abilities, and scholastic success beyond grade 8 at other area high schools.

This is not intended as a criticism of the school or what they have accomplished. It's a great school. But what gets measured, gets done. Here's their mission statement:

"[Our school], under God's direction, is dedicated to the spiritual, academic, physical, social and emotional development of God's children, equipping them to love God, love people and serve in God's world."

Are we meeting our mission? And how do we know?

I believe that the answer to these two questions begins with intentionality. We must be purposeful and intent on measuring our effectiveness at the faith elements of our Christian mission.

There may be some who bristle at the idea of measuring “spiritual things,” noting that Scripture tells us that only God knows the hearts of man. But measuring our mission and our effectiveness at faith formation and worldview shaping is not the same thing as giving a student a letter grade based on how much we think he “loves God.”

I set out this year to explore this idea of how I could measure our school’s Christian mission – to determine what were our strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate what was working and what was not – so that we could be strategic in our planning moving forward.

The three areas that I wanted to be really intentional about were:

1. Spiritual Climate – having an atmosphere conducive to spiritual growth
2. Faith Formation – belief, discipleship, and spiritual disciplines
3. Biblical Worldview – being informed by Scripture in all areas of life

Spiritual Climate

Working with the premise that what’s gets measured, gets done, we wanted to assess how conducive the school’s culture and experience are to a student’s spiritual growth.

Working with *The Cultivate Project*, we have established a professional development training that transforms faculty members from teachers to mentors. To determine how well our faculty members form meaningful relationships with students and impart their personal faith to students, we use two student surveys created by *The Cultivate Project*.

The first is a school climate survey that students complete using a Likert scale to answer 15 questions. Six of the questions address the topics of meaningful relationships with faculty and seven questions assess how effectively teachers are imparting their personal faith. The two remaining questions are open-ended for follow-up. Giving this survey early in the year, prior to implementing any mentoring plans provides a baseline. Re-assessing at the end of the year allows for comparisons.

The second survey tool is the Student Life Survey. This more in-depth survey measures a student’s spiritual disciplines and reveals who has helped them form their spiritual beliefs. It also assesses their thoughts about their school experience and who in the school community has been influential in their lives. The results are analyzed and used to target potential areas of growth and identify future staff development opportunities.

Faith Formation

The Willowcreek Association has been doing some interesting work with Christian schools through a research study called REVEAL. The study reported four key building blocks of students’ faith formation:

1. Spiritual continuum – students demonstrate a spiritual continuum of intimacy in their relationship with Christ and love for others. This continuum is highly predictive of spiritual growth and the study provides strategies for moving from one level to the next.
2. Stages of student identity development – diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement – reveals to what degree students are personally owning their religious commitments.
3. School and parent impact model and Spiritual Vitality Gauge – these tools assist in reporting the impact of the school and the parents on a student’s spiritual growth, leading to an overall individual Spiritual Vitality score that represents student growth in beliefs, practices, and faith into action.
4. Parent contribution to their children’s spiritual development – was there a relationship between adult spiritual growth and that of their children? What kinds of things that parent do contribute to their child’s faith formation? What should we be encouraging our parents do to at home?

By giving this assessment to our students, we can better understand where they are at in the journey of faith and how to be strategic and intentional in creating experiences that can move them toward greater maturity of faith. Longitudinally, the data can help a school understand whether we are having a real impact on a student’s faith formation and discipleship over time.

Biblical Worldview

For many Christian youth today, their worldview is dualistic, fractured between a faith in God and a secular ideology about His world. To better prepare students to live out their faith in practice and to pattern their lives after the wisdom of Scripture, we must be intentional about integrating Biblical teaching into every subject matter, not just our religion courses. To that end, we identified a four-part process that we would follow:

1. Curriculum Mapping (describing "the what") - establishing benchmarks for each grade level (K-12) for both Biblical teaching and worldview training.
2. Instruction (describing "the how") - developing strategies for instruction designed to meet the established benchmarks.
3. Assessment (answering "did they learn?") - creating a series of assessment tools to be used to measure a student's mastery of the materials, but also a standardized method by which the school could self-assess by comparing scores year-to-year.
4. Connected Learning Experiences (clarifying "the why") - developing practices that make the learning of the materials meaningful and relevant by connecting student learning to the Creation Mandate, the Great Commission, and the Greatest Commandment.

Working with consultant Dan Beerens and using the online platform Curriculum Trak, we began the first step of mapping our curriculum for all courses offered in grades K-12.

Curriculum Trak's platform allows us to create time frames, add units, outline objectives, list instructional strategies, inventory resources, and align to benchmarks and standards. This mapping process is valuable in evaluating curriculum and teaching and ensuring that students are receiving instruction and assessment for the required state or national standards. Once mapped, we began to outline the instructional strategies we would use within each unit.

Curriculum Trak has two additional features that are really important for Christian schools wanting to be more intentional about their Christian mission – entry fields for biblical perspective and essential questions. As teachers map their courses and objectives, they can also be intentional about the faith learning integration, noting their own ideas on how to integrate a biblical perspective or using those developed by Dr. Mark Eckel and built into the Curriculum Trak platform. This helps us clarify “the why” and create those meaningful connected learning experiences.

The thoughtful development of essential questions provides an evaluative tool for determining how well we are meeting the “big picture” ideals within a specific teaching unit. For example, a fourth grade writing assessment answering the question, “What is grace?” can reveal much about both the writing instruction and the bigger questions of faith formation in our students. Curriculum and instructional strategies can be evaluated in light of the feedback, and, if these writings are kept year-to-year, they can provide longitudinal data on whether we are making improvements in how students respond to this question. To measure gains, we can use the same prompt as an assessment again in a later grade, perhaps at the completion of middle school.

Summary

The year spent exploring this topic has been an exciting and enlightening experience. While I feel like we have done a lot in this first year, we have also only scratched the surface. The curriculum mapping project will take another year to complete and we have already contracted with consultant Dan Beerens to continue leading us through the process. Some of the assessments and surveys have been implemented within the school, but a wider implementation and data analysis will be needed to better inform decision-making moving forward.

I began by asking two questions of myself – are we meeting our mission? And how do we know? My quest for a resounding “YES! And here's why...” motivates me to remember these two keys: our mission is our distinctive, so be intentional. And what gets measured, gets done, so be strategic.

May the work of The Rock School and every Christian school produce students who lives are a testimony of a mission statement fulfilled for God's glory.