



WALK INTO ONE CHRISTIAN school in North Carolina, as I recently did, and you'll find a 2nd-grade classroom wall covered with creative writing about a Monet painting. Below the painting of overcast skies and small boats on shimmering waters, the children's stories answer the questions, "Where does the light in the painting come from?" and, "How does this painting make you feel?" Progressive educators would be impressed with the classroom's open, child- and group-centered learning.

Visit another Christian school, just 70 miles away, and you'll find 1st-graders reciting their phonics lesson in unison. A bright young woman leads the class in

speaking in many tongues

The common stereotypes of Christian schools mask their healthy diversity

by DAVID SIKKINK

a chorus of "Aaah, Aaah, Apple," "Eh, Eh, Egg." The class has a community spirit, much like singing a hymn at church. The drill includes the teacher's asking factual questions, looking for a single right answer. Though the classroom atmosphere is hardly grim, some educators would consider the structure too rigid. They would disapprove of the teacher-centered instruction, of the seemingly heavy-handed curriculum that leaves little room for individual styles of learning and creativity.

Two Christian schools, two very different styles. Yet the stereotype of conservative Christian schools survives: that of a monolithic movement, of carbon-copy schools rigidly structured according to conservative Protestant interpretations of the Bible and views of morality. Researchers are beginning to question this simple picture, discerning a healthy diversity among schools that were once portrayed as interchangeable. Both the debate over school choice and the general controversy over whether religious

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN WEBER



education can serve public purposes might benefit from understanding just how much diversity there is within the Christian-schools movement.

Distinctions

The explosive growth of the conservative Christian school movement in the 1970s and 1980s was a response to the events and trends of the turbulent '60s: the consolidation of a secular science curriculum after the Soviet Union raced ahead in space exploration; the rise of the counterculture and the rioting in urban areas; and the Supreme Court decisions that restricted prayer and Bible reading in public schools. In the eyes of many Christian schoolers, they have not chosen to withdraw from American society; the culture and society have moved away from them.

Critics of Christian schools often recount a different history, one that is rooted in the creation of southern segregationist academies to allow white students to escape court-ordered busing. No doubt racial integration in the public schools played a large role in spawning many Christian schools in the past, but recent studies show that Christian schools often generate greater interaction among students of different races than do public schools. Most Christian schools now see racial inclusion as a way to demonstrate the ability of religion to create ties across races. Most of the schools I visited made special efforts—including offering reduced tuition—to reach out to African-American churches to increase the racial diversity of their schools.

At a time when Catholic enrollments have been declining and overall private enrollments are barely holding their own (Figures 1 and 2), Christian schools are booming. They num-

bered roughly 2,500 in 1972; today, their 9,000 schools account for about 25 percent of all private schools in the United States. Forty years ago, mainline Methodist and Episcopal schools, and perhaps even Catholic schools, were numbered among the country's "Christian schools." Yet the dramatic growth in the 1970s of schools within "conservative" Protestant religious movements led to a narrower definition: a "Christian school" is one that's affiliated with one of the conservative Protestant denominations, such as Southern Baptist and Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and, in general, with one of the dominant streams within conservative Protestantism—the evangelical, charismatic, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal religious movements.

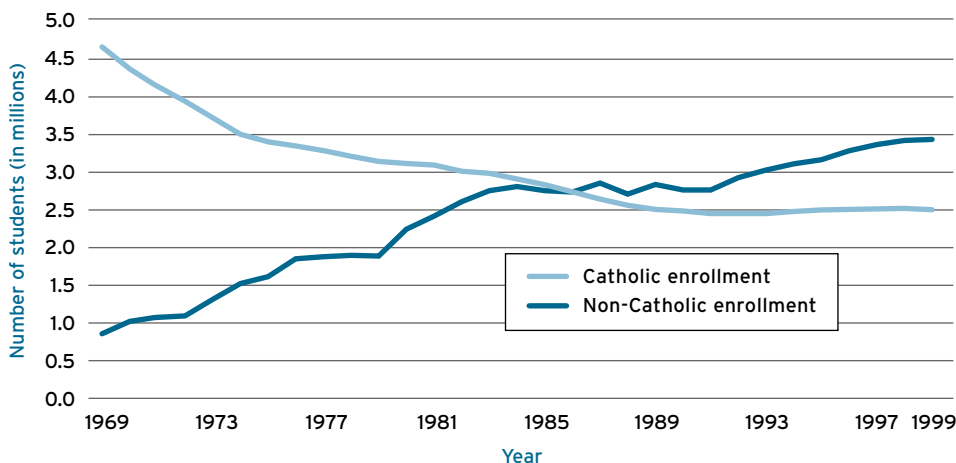
While they have a family resemblance, these conservative Protestant religious movements are by no means identical. The fundamentalist movement's Christian schools, for instance, emerged from its radical stance on separating believers from "the world." Often found among Baptist denominations, fundamentalists seek to nurture children in the faith by uniting church, home, and school. By contrast, the evangelical movement, which arose in the 1940s to oppose the fundamentalists, tends to think of Christian schools less in terms of walling out the world's influence and more as a means of integrating conservative religious traditions into the broader society and culture.

Pentecostals share the separatist stance of fundamentalists, but their style of worship—their emotional and experiential faith, with its emphasis on spiritual experiences such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy—contrasts with the more-staid expressions of fundamentalism. Pentecostalism's origins among the poor further enhance its adherents' feeling of being outsiders vis-à-vis secular society. The charismatic movement, a 1960s offshoot of the evangelical movement, is similar to Pentecostalism in its style of worship, yet it eschews highly structured forms of education in favor of individual expression and creativity.

Among conservative Christians, the strongest expressed support for Christian schools is found within the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. These movements are in greater tension with the status quo at public schools and define a much stronger boundary between their faith and the secular world. By contrast, evangelicals tend to believe that Christians should keep their children in public schools as witnesses and as sources of influence on non-Christians, the school, and the nation. Evangelicals usually leave public schools reluctantly and see Christ-

Growth and Decline (Figure 1)

While enrollments of other private schools have climbed steadily since 1969, those of Catholic schools have been falling for the past 30 years, only to stabilize recently.



SOURCE: Digest of Education Statistics, 2000. For details see www.edmattersmore.org

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ian schools as a stopgap measure in these “troubled” times.

Denominational Diversity

In a few cases, the diversity among Christian schools also emanates from their denominations. For example, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), a conservative branch of the Lutheran church, has a tradition of Christian schools that reaches back to the 19th century. For a single denomination, the LCMS boasts the largest number of private religious schools (more than 1,000) outside of the Catholic church. Schools affiliated with the LCMS have their origins in the German ethnic communities of the Midwest. Like Catholics, German Lutherans were not welcomed with open arms into the growing public schooling movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, so they turned to establishing their own schools. Later, the LCMS schools grew stronger and took on greater symbolic importance in the denomination’s struggles against “modernism” within the liberal and mainline wings of the Lutheran church. Their German ethnic heritage and the struggle over the definition of Lutheranism have led to LCMS schools that are tightly integrated with their local churches, permeated with traditional Lutheran doctrine, and staffed by Lutherans trained in LCMS colleges. The importance of this connection between school and church is evident in the tuition policies of the schools, which offer substantial discounts for members of the LCMS church. The result is that LCMS students are often the majority in the schools, especially at the elementary-school level. In addition, the schools take on the task of preparing LCMS children for membership in the church and the partaking of communion. These “confirmation classes” are directly integrated into the LCMS school curriculum.

Another important denominational source of Christian schools—especially considering the small size of the denomination—is the Christian Reformed denomination, which traces its theological heritage not to Martin Luther but to John Calvin. Based largely in Michigan and Iowa, Christian Reformed churches developed schools in keeping with their Dutch ethnic heritage and their religiously grounded belief that education is inherently value-laden and, therefore, Christians must attempt to integrate a Christian perspective on knowledge into every educational nook and cranny. One of the most influential national Christian schooling organizations, Christian Schools International, grew out of the Reformed denominations.

The differences among Christian schools within the various conservative Protestant religious movements and denominations are not always sharp. Over time, ethnic distinctiveness has subsided, and some conservative Protestant religious tra-

ditions in schooling have diffused throughout the movement—partly through the growth and consolidation of Christian-schooling organizations and of publishers of Christian school materials. The financial realities of Christian schools also tend to dull the sharp edges of religious doctrine. Almost all Christian schools are financially precarious. Annual tuition, usually somewhere between \$1,500 and \$4,500 per student, covers some 80 percent of the annual budget. Christian schools simply can’t afford to turn away too many tuition-paying students. This requires them to appeal to a broad, diverse group of parents, which influences their policies and practices, sometimes forcing them to relax religious prescriptions.

There are at least three types of Christian schools. The first consists of Christian schools affiliated with the evangelical movement. It encompasses some Southern Baptist schools, most Christian Reformed schools, and many independent Christian schools. This type tends to be more open to professional edu-

Free Will Baptist

Mark, the principal of Free Will Baptist Christian School, explains that his school is “a rib in the umbrella” that is Free Will Baptist Church. Many of the major decisions at the school, a K-12 facility in a medium-sized city in eastern North Carolina, are made after consulting church deacons and the pastor. Free Will shares facilities with the church, and about 40 percent of the students and their parents attend the sponsoring church.

The atmosphere at the school can best be described as disciplined. Students, even the younger ones, eat their lunch in amazing tranquillity. Dress is restricted; girls wear skirts and dresses. Classroom activities fairly closely follow an integrated curriculum put out by Bob Jones University Press, the Christian publisher popular with many fundamentalists.

The 1st-grade class I visited was running through its phonics drills with aplomb. Though this approach is not welcomed by some professional educators, it produced a rather impressive display of advanced phonics knowledge at a young age. The infusion of Christian faith into education was evident; health class, for instance, is taught from a Bob Jones book entitled *Health, Safety, and Manners*. The kids seemed excited about reading in unison: “God gave us eyes that work—we are thankful. God expects me to take care of my eyes, too. . . . God made our heads so wonderfully that our eyes are protected.” The lesson ends with the reminder that “God gives us the responsibility to take care of our bodies.” In this way, learning about and caring for the body is given a sacred motive, but, as in public schools, the kids are still simply learning to wash their hands before meals.



cational techniques and more focused on an academic mission. The Fundamentalists—the whipping boy of the popular press—focus their schools on developing personal character and discipline and teaching fundamentalist doctrines, such as the literal interpretation of the Bible and six-day creationism. The third group of Christian schools, affiliated with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, has a more specific ethnic bias but seems to mirror the fundamentalist Baptist schools in its emphasis on creationism in science classes.

Beyond these three types of conservative Protestant schools, the boundaries are less clear. Schools affiliated with the charis-

ability to withstand peer pressure at public schools. The American emphasis on expressing individuality has as much of an effect on most Christian parents as it does on everyone else.

Indeed, many Christian parents do not develop a strong, ideological commitment to the Christian school. More likely, the school is viewed as the appropriate vehicle in light of a child’s needs, his personality, his experience at public schools, and available alternatives. In this way and others, Christian schools confront the same cultural trends as other American institutions—trends that value individual choice over institutional

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matic movement may look exactly like evangelical schools. Little is known about African-American Christian schools, but they are likely to differ not only because of race but also because of religion.

The Bible, apparently, can justify several very different schooling strategies. For example, some conservative Christian schools require that parents share the religious orientation of the school, while others invoke the Bible to support open-admissions policies. Some Christian schools use biblical passages to justify a disciplined learning structure. Others embrace learning environments designed to foster creativity and community by drawing on doctrines that see individuals as reflecting God’s image through creativity, imagination, and social solidarity.

The same is true for issues of science versus faith. Some conservative Protestants use a literal interpretation of Genesis to justify teaching “creation science” as opposed to evolution. Others see the biblical creation story as perfectly consistent with the general outlines of scientific theories of evolution. Some schools are divided from within, as even the most devout conservative Protestants struggle to figure out exactly what the Bible has to say about whether the classroom environment should be more authoritarian or egalitarian and whether schools should focus on the advancement of all students or expend special resources on the academically gifted—or on those who lag behind.

Parents

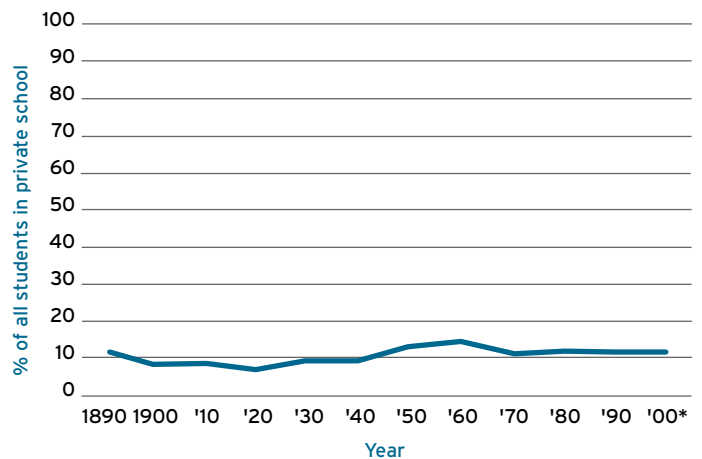
Contrary to common assumptions, only a small minority of conservative Christians take the stance that Christian kids should be in Christian schools as a matter of principle. In fact, most evangelicals have long considered participation in public schools as a religious calling. When asked whether Christians should try to fix public schools or build strong Christian schools, 56 percent of Christian schoolers favored working with the public schools. It is common for parents to send one child to Christian school and others to public school, based on their assessment of each youngster’s personal and moral strength and

authority. The American penchant for expressive individualism means that most conservative religious parents often place a higher priority on the unique qualities of individual children and the prerogatives of parental choice than on church dogma. This makes it difficult for schools to develop a solid and committed clientele.

Christian-schoolers, not surprisingly, are distinctive in what they see as the most important goals of a good education. They are less likely than other churchgoing Protestants to think that learning job skills is the top educational priority; they are much less likely to see building children’s self-esteem as an important educational goal. Interestingly, even the average Christian schooler is not much less likely than other churchgoers to think that a top priority in education is teaching children about diverse races, religions, and cultures (67 percent versus 73 percent). While Christian schoolers are commonly thought to choose Christian schooling so that their children may learn discipline and respect for

Even Keel (Figure 2)

Overall, the percentage of students in private school has remained fairly stable for most of the past half-century.



* Estimated

SOURCE: *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1999. For details see www.edmattersmore.org

authority, they are no more likely than other churchgoing Protestants to see this as a top priority in education (84 percent of both groups). Christian schoolers are much more likely, however, to say that teaching a Christian perspective on knowledge is a top priority in a good education.

Textbook Faith

Before reading the profiles of several Christian schools in North Carolina and Indiana that are scattered throughout this essay, it is important to understand the differences among the various curricula they use. (Note that the names used in the profiles are fictitious, since Christian schools, like most public institutions, are sensitive about their public image.) In terms of coursework, the curricula at Christian schools generally follow the standard secular models of what education is about. Surveys show that they are no different from public schools in the number of math, English, science, social studies, and computer-science classes that are required for graduation. Christian schools have a slightly greater emphasis on foreign languages, which may reflect the ethnic origins of some of them. Yet the evidence does not show that Bible and theology requirements are crowding out the standard curriculum found in public schools.

What is noticeably Christian about Christian schools is the content of the curricular materials they use. A Beka and Bob Jones University Press are two of the heavyweights in Christian school curriculum, offering everything from English and science to a full-fledged Bible curriculum. Many fundamentalist schools build their curriculum entirely around the publications of these presses. A Beka, which sees itself as building “the content of every textbook on the foundation of God’s Word,” states that it does not “paraphrase progressive education textbooks and add biblical principles,” but rather does “primary research in every subject and looks at the subject from God’s point of view.”

Evangelical schools often disparage A Beka and Bob Jones University Press, preferring secular textbooks or texts available from Christian Schools International (CSI) and—especially for classical Christian schools—Veritas or Logos. The curriculum available from evangelical publishing houses is less likely to promote the view frequently found in fundamentalist texts that the United States is a Christian nation that needs to be restored to its former greatness, or is a “redeemer” nation unto the world.

In terms of evolution versus creationism, fundamentalist science materials “teach young students the facts of Creation as presented in the Bible” and “set forth the days of Creation and what was created on each day.” Evangelical science texts, by contrast, do not insist on a literal six-day creation. CSI claims its science materials will “empower students to discover the infinite complexity and amazing orderliness of God’s world. . . . The Bible and science are complementary, together helping us to understand God’s plan and purpose for creation.”

First Baptist Christian School

First Baptist Christian School in Indiana is quite similar to Free Will Baptist, but with a stronger fundamentalist flavor. The principal, Jeff, a graduate of Bob Jones University, is less experienced than the principal at Free Will Baptist. Partly because of Jeff’s relative inexperience, First Baptist’s pastor and deacons play a large role in the decision-making at the school.

First Baptist requires parents to sign a statement of faith, which closely follows conservative Baptist doctrine. In practice, parents are simply agreeing not to oppose the teaching of Baptist doctrine in Bible studies class. Parents must also have a recommendation from their pastor, certifying that they are active in the church. In addition, the applicant’s pastor must read the Baptist doctrinal statement of the school and circle the parts with which he disagrees. As the principal explained, this is necessary because the three key engines for the spiritual and moral development of the child—church, family, and school—must all be pulling in the same direction.

In Jeff’s view, some Christian schools have an evangelistic purpose, but his school focuses on discipleship—that is, instilling the discipline and character befitting followers of Christ. Those who want to come to the school have to clear some fairly high hurdles. Jeff explains that the school attempts to “apply the Bible to every area of a child’s life.” He says that he can usually tell if a prospective parent is serious about the kind of Christian education that the school provides. Parents looking only for discipline and orderliness are sometimes turned away. As Jeff puts it, these things are important, but the school “must have a spiritual reason for existing.”

First Baptist pursues its students’ spiritual development through the use of the Bob Jones and A Beka curricula, a weekly chapel that summons the students to greater discipleship, prayer, devotionals at the beginning of classes, and a daily Bible class for all students. Students are encouraged to do “Christian service,” including sharing their faith with others and helping in the school or community. At First Baptist, creationism is taught in science class first, and then evolution is discussed as a competing theory. Most teachers are not certified, although they have college degrees.

First Baptist has many of the elements that are often thought to characterize all Christian schools. Corporal punishment is allowed, but it is used only as a last resort. Boys can be spanked only by the principal; the girls, only by a female teacher. Witnesses must be present, and parents must be notified. Before resorting to spanking, teachers and administrators try to persuade the child by reading from Proverbs in the Bible or by giving demerits or detention.

Governance

Organizational and socioeconomic characteristics often create differences among Christian schools. Christian schools run by a board of parents from several different churches tend to differ in important ways from schools subsidized and run by



a particular church. A school that is run by and for a local church is more likely to mirror the religious contours of the denomination in its classrooms, Bible classes, and chapel. Its mission and organization are shaped by its primary constituency, which is usually the members of the church itself. The elders and pastors of that church tend to have considerable say over decisions in the school. The principal may also be an associate pastor at the church. By contrast, schools run by a board of Christian parents, independent of any local church, tend to incorporate more generic forms of the Christian faith, partly because of the religious diversity of the board and parents.

In a similar vein, middle-class and more-educated parents tend to shape Christian schools toward less tension with the outside world, greater emphasis on academic excellence, less rigid social control of students, greater room for individual creativity and expression, and less denominationally distinctive ways of integrating religion into school life.

The day-to-day governance of Christian schools is very different from that of public schools, in large part because control over such things as hiring practices and curricular policies is vested entirely at the school level. Indeed, Christian school board members often account for a good percentage of the donations that keep the school running, functioning as shareholders of a corporation that always runs in the red. At one school, for example, the board compared tuition income with actual expenses at the end of the year, and divvied up the deficit among themselves.

The financial difficulties of Christian schools not only force them to put significant energies into fundraising, but also make them more market-driven than is often acknowledged. Market forces soften the hard edges of religion as schools compete to attract students and financial support. Pressures for religious particularity—such as teaching students the Baptist doctrine that only adult believers should be baptized—are nearly always checked by the need to attract more students. In fact, one study has found that Christian schools are a moderating force on religious sectarianism, since the schools must attract students from other churches, and parents from different churches come into close contact through involvement in a common school.

To ensure that family and school pull in one direction, most Christian schools require that one or more parents of an enrolling child sign a “covenant,” or statement of faith, and perhaps also a lifestyle agreement. These statements of faith, however, vary from a minimal assent to faith in Jesus Christ to a nearly complete doctrinal statement of a Baptist denomination.

A significant minority of Christian schools sees their mission as including applicants without regard to religion, as long as parents are aware of the religious nature of the school and will not oppose it. This organizational difference often marks a deeper fault line within the Christian school movement: While the more fundamentalist schools generally require covenants, the evangelical schools are split on this issue. Some believe that maintaining a Christian identity is done at the level

Trinity Christian Academy

An independent school of 65 students in grades 8-12 in rural North Carolina, Trinity Christian Academy places much more emphasis than do the Baptist schools on academic excellence, which it sees as a Christian calling to glorify God in this world. The academic emphasis provides a small but viable niche for the school within a community in which education is not highly valued. Indeed, some students leave Trinity because their parents are not comfortable with its press for academic excellence.

Trinity itself doesn't turn its back on a challenge, though. Three students who were expelled from public schools for drugs and fighting have improved markedly under Trinity's rigorous discipline and academic focus. The solidarity across family and school contributes to the effective socialization of students. Students are called on to include

“problem” youngsters or, as the students would say, “weird” kids.

Not long before my visit, some students caught smoking behind the school were suspended for the day, received a zero on their tests, and were required to mop floors for a week. The students also apologized publicly to the rest of the school for breaking the rules.

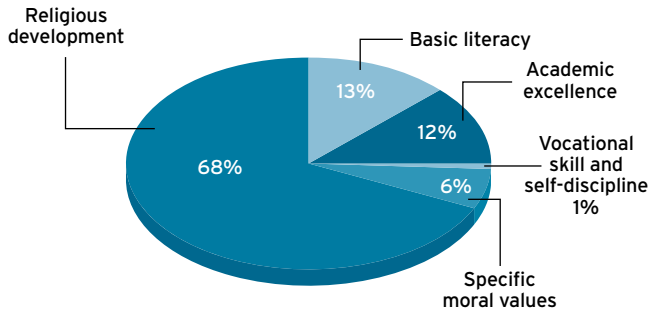
The day at Trinity starts with a short chapel in which a student and a teacher provide an inspirational reading or devotion. At one chapel, a female student read an inspirational passage, warning against the attitude “If it feels good, do it.” The moral of the story was that feelings are not an adequate guide to morality and learning. Prayer and announcements follow within a school culture that is best described as a family atmosphere. The chapel ends with the older students giving Ms. Bishop, who

has been principal for four years, a “circle hug” in appreciation of her work over the school year. As with many smaller schools, the leadership has much to do with the overall atmosphere of the school and its successes and failures. At Trinity, even the students are wildly enthusiastic about Ms. Bishop.

The family atmosphere no doubt arises from the struggles and sacrifices that parents and teachers have made to keep this young organization going. Finding adequate facilities on a shoestring budget is a challenge, as it is for many independent schools. After several attempts, Trinity was able to rent a rundown community center in a poor area of town. Fixing up and maintaining the building, while remaining in the good graces of their landlord, the city, is a team effort—with parents, teachers, and students working side by side.

Religious Upbringing (Figure 3)

Of Christian-school principals surveyed, 68 percent claim “religious development” as their top educational goal, while 25 percent listed “basic literacy” or “academic excellence.”



SOURCE: National Center for Educational Statistics.

of teachers and administrators, and they see their mission as enveloping Christian and non-Christian students alike.

Private and Public Purposes

With so much diversity, what makes the Christian-schools movement a movement? What unites them? One constant mission across Christian schools is that family, church, and school should work together for the intellectual, moral, and spiritual direction of the child. Reflecting this mission, the primary educational goal at Christian schools, according to 68 percent of Christian-school principals in the United States, is the religious or spiritual development of students. Not all principals, however, agreed: 13 percent saw the primary goal as basic literacy skills; 12 percent mentioned academic excellence. Only 1 percent mentioned the goal of promoting good work habits and self-discipline, often thought to be the forte of Christian schools (see Figure 3).

The runner-up goal most often mentioned by principals is academic excellence: 37 percent of the Christian schools indicating religious development as their top education goal said academic excellence was their second most important one. Again, neither self-discipline nor specific moral values was a popular choice, but achieving basic literacy skills was fairly popular: 27 percent of these schools said this was their second most important goal.

Religious mission leads to another constant across Christian schools: Nearly all of them require a fairly strong statement of faith from job applicants. Applications for teachers often include a written or verbal personal testimony of their faith and agreement on what are considered the basics of the faith, such as belief in Jesus Christ through faith and an obligation to live a holy life in response to grace. Some of the more conservative Baptist-affiliated schools require employees to be in accord with

Reformed Christian School

Reformed Christian School, located in a medium-sized city in Indiana, draws most of its teachers from Calvin College in Michigan. The school has 150 students from preschool through 8th grade, housed in a new brick building with wide hallways and comfortable classrooms. Since the school is run by an independent board of ministers, it is not surprising that the students represent more than 50 churches in the surrounding area. “Pastor-and-Me Day” brought together ministers from a diversity of Christian traditions, including a Catholic priest. According to the principal, the diversity of parents tends to mitigate Christian Reformed traditions and doctrine, since some parents want denominational details left to the churches.

Reformed’s principal, Nancy, a young single woman who has been with the school for half of its six-year existence, criticizes the “Sunday School” approach in popular Christian curricula, such as those from Bob Jones Press and A Beka, which amounts to “tacking on a Bible story at the end of class.” Nancy says she would rather use a good secular text and critique and apply it from a Christian perspective.

Reformed Christian’s curriculum is influenced in many ways by the latest trends in professional educational circles. That does not mean that religion at Reformed is just window dressing. The school’s leaders, guided by information and materials provided by Christian Schools International, have a burden to select and adapt—according to their understanding of a Christian worldview—the latest developments in professional educational literature. Free Will Baptist Christian School uses traditional desks organized in straight rows, while the classroom at Reformed is organized in “centers,” with round tables and chairs in different sections of the room for activities for each subject. The principal says that a structure of learning that facilitates making connections across subjects—a holistic approach to knowledge—not only helps kids learn, but also helps them to understand the integral order of God’s creation.

As Nancy explained, from a religious perspective each child is uniquely created and gifted. Hence there is no one right path to academic success. As a result, Reformed has a much more egalitarian feel than either most public-school classrooms or fundamentalist schools, with more parental involvement in the educational process.

more detailed Baptist doctrine, though there is plenty of slippage between stated policy and actual practice. The LCMS schools take a slightly different approach: they require almost all of their teachers and administrators to be trained at LCMS colleges.

Still, despite their distinct religious missions, the sharp boundary between public schools and private religious schools makes it difficult for us to see the ways in which today’s so-called private schools perform public functions. Even fundamentalist schools spend much more time teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic than teaching the Bible and Bap-



tist doctrine. Most of the “integration” of religion and basic subject matter at Christian schools would not offend the average American of any faith.

Christian schools also serve a public function by providing an organizational space for alternative teaching techniques and forms of schooling. They keep alive or develop instructional approaches and educational philosophies that may not have an opportunity to thrive in public schools, which are often governed by outside professional dictates and state mandates. For example, the trend toward “whole language” techniques for teaching reading in public schools contrasts with the hard-core phonics approach in fundamentalist Christian schools. Children with different learning styles may find what they need in a Christian school. Likewise, Christian schools offer models that may prove useful to public schools by eschewing standardized testing; reviving Latin, logic, and rhetoric; emphasizing the place of music and foreign languages; refusing to track students by ability; or choosing an unhurried approach to learning. Coherent missions and moral socialization through networks that incorporate family, school, and other aspects of life (in this case, churches) are among the hallmarks of Christian schools and may provide direction to public educators who are worried about alienated adolescents and withdrawn families. Christian schools have long served as models for local control of decision-making and smaller school size.

For parents whose children are not succeeding in public schools, the alternatives nurtured in Christian schools may provide a viable cure. One family I talked with turned to a Chris-

tian school after one of their children seemed overcome by negative peer influence, discipline breakdowns, and drug problems in their public schools. The smaller school size, the strong and overlapping social networks, and the sacred canopy over moral norms and values made it more possible to instill self-discipline in their child.

The real diversity among Christian schools and the fact that they do serve public purposes do not put to rest all of the standard critiques of Christian schooling—concerns about racial segregation, authoritarianism, dogmatism, insularity, and social inequality. Yet these criticisms are not nearly as far-reaching as they once seemed. The influence of the market on financially precarious Christian schools has forced them to moderate the role of religion and to create a more democratic governing structure that is responsive to parents. Parents’ commitment to a Christian school is also looser than it might seem, since American individualism and parents’ concern for their children often trump institutional and community authority. The old stereotype of “fundamentalist” Christian schools as rigid and insular distorts their public image. The pressures of mainstream culture and market forces, as well as internal differences in religious style and governance, have created a wide diversity of Christian schools—a diversity that in many ways contributes to the public good.

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Covenant Christian School

The 1st-grade class at Covenant Christian school, set in a medium-sized university town in North Carolina, starts the day with prayer and then the Pledge of Allegiance—in English and Latin. The Latin emphasis at Covenant Christian illustrates the influence of the “Classical and Christian School” movement, inspired by the writings of Dorothy Sayers on the “tools of learning” that marked medieval education. Children begin their education by learning grammar, especially foundational languages such as Latin, and then move through logic and rhetoric.

In the church sanctuary, a group of neatly dressed 6th-graders assembled before an audience of parents, grandparents, administrators, and 5th-graders to debate the merits of capital punishment. Whatever the source of the debate’s quality—in which students invoked authorities ranging from

the works of Dorothy Sayers to downloads from the Web—it was impressive. Expecting religious arguments to dominate the debate, I instead heard students freely mixing standard “secular” arguments for and against capital punishment with references to biblical passages and Christian obligations. Citing Bible passages that emphasized God’s mercy and forgiveness, the team against capital punishment seemed to win the contest to invoke the most Bible verses. As one student put it, capital punishment is “killing one of God’s prized possessions.”

New Covenant parents are encouraged to attend a few discussions of school philosophy in the evening. At one of these meetings, a school board member emphasized that Covenant is sometimes controversial with parents because it spends considerable resources on liberal arts skills, including Latin, and it favors “unhurried learning,”

which is code for a movement among homeschoolers and some private schools to account for a child’s own interests and motivation in deciding how and what the child should learn at each stage in school. The question he posed was whether parents were willing to give up advanced placement classes, which Covenant is not likely to have, in favor of a less structured and less pressured learning environment.

An overly rigid school structure and too much homework, several parents agreed, suppressed imagination and creativity and hindered the important work of the family. The board member also asked parents to avoid being simply consumers of education who pursue their own wants and interests for their children, and instead to become part of a community of parents and teachers working toward a greater collective good.