
INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN DAY SCHOOLS: THE MATURING OF A MOVEMENT

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Independent Christian day schools have always played a prominent role in American education. This article provides a brief historical overview of the origin of independent Christian schools; examines some of the research on their composition, success, and enrollment trends; and draws some preliminary conclusions about the ethos of such schools following a field-based observation. Catholic educators will recognize the primary challenges these schools face: financial stability and spiritual vitality.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Protestant-sponsored weekday schooling is not new to American education. Throughout the colonial and early national periods, Protestant churches, such as the Lutheran, Friends, Moravian, Baptist, German Reformed, and Anglican, established day schools for their children and charity schools for children of the poor (Curran, 1954). During the 19th century, several denominations, such as the Old School Presbyterians, experimented with alternatives to common schools. With few exceptions, most notably among Calvinist and Lutheran bodies that sponsored schools to preserve cultural or confessional purity, their success was limited. By the late 1800s, most Protestant denominations supported public schooling (Kaestle, 1983; Kraushaar, 1972; Sherrill, 1932).

The vast majority of Protestants have supported public education since its inception during the mid-1800s. Indeed, as Tyack (1966), Smith (1967), Carper (1978), Jorgenson (1987), and other historians have demonstrated, they were frequently in the vanguard of the common school movement of the

mid-1800s. They supported public education because it embodied their beliefs and served as an integral part of their crusade to fashion a Christian (which, to the dismay of many Roman Catholics, usually meant a Protestant) America. According to noted church historian Handy (1971), elementary schools did not need to be under the control of particular denominations because "their role was to prepare young Americans for participation in the broadly Christian civilization toward which all evangelicals were working" (p. 102).

While the common school, by means of Bible reading without comment, prayers, hymns, Protestant teachers, and the ubiquitous McGuffey readers, inculcated the mutually reinforcing dispositions and beliefs of nondenominational Protestantism, republicanism, and capitalism, the Sunday school was expected to stress the particular tenets of the various denominations. This educational arrangement of "parallel institutions" was satisfactory to most Protestants in the last half of the 19th century (Kennedy, 1966; Lynn, 1964; Lynn & Wright, 1980). Indeed, by 1900, approximately 92% of elementary and secondary students attended public institutions. Private schools, the vast majority of which were Roman Catholic, enrolled about 8% (Wattenberg, 1976).

Much has changed since the formulation of the "parallel institutions" strategy. Protestantism no longer shapes American culture and the public schools as it did in the 1800s. The early 20th century witnessed its gradual decline as the dominant culture-shaping force and the growing influence of secularism, particularly among social elites (Noll, 1992). Pointing out the disruptive effect on American Protestantism of higher criticism, Darwinism, growing cultural and religious pluralism, and the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that fractured many denominations, Hunter (1983) argues, with only slight exaggeration, that "in the course of roughly thirty-five years (ca. 1895-1930), Protestantism had been moved from cultural domination to cognitive marginality and political impotence. The world view of modernity had gained ascendancy in American culture" (p. 37). In his wide-ranging work, *Religion in American Public Life*, Reichley (1985) further maintained that since the 1950s this value-belief system—which posits an evolutionary view of the cosmos, touts science and reason as the keys to human progress and knowledge, denies the relevance of deity to human affairs, and assumes that moral values can be derived from human experience—has been dominant within the intellectual community. This secular humanistic point of view, he asserts, has exerted considerable influence on the entertainment industry, the media, and parts of the educational enterprise.

Noted church-state scholar Pfeffer (1977) was probably correct when he claimed, "secular humanism is a cultural force which, in many respects, is stronger in the United States than any of the major religious groups or any alliance among them" (p. 211). On the other hand, the public outcry follow-

ing the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court decisions regarding prayer and devotional Bible reading in tax-supported schools, the resurgence of evangelicalism amidst the cultural and political crises of the 1960s and 1970s, and the political activism of conservative Protestants in the 1980s and 1990s at the national, state, and local levels suggest that a significant minority of the general public is very uncomfortable with a quasi-official secular worldview and a public square that is devoid of symbols of America's Christian heritage (Baer & Carper, 2000; Carter, 1993; Hunter, 1991; Linder, 1975; Neuhaus, 1985).

Profoundly dissatisfied with what they perceive to be the secularistic—not neutral—belief system embodied in the public school curriculum, unsatisfactory behavioral and academic standards, and the centralized control of public education, a growing number of conservative Protestants have tried to regain control of their children's education. Since the 1960s they have employed several strategies. Many evangelicals and fundamentalists have sought to incorporate theistic symbols and perspectives in the public schools through, for example, teaching about creationism or intelligent design, Ten Commandments posters, voluntary religious activities on high school campuses, and history texts that recognize the influence of Christianity on the development of the United States. Others have either protested the use of curricular materials that they believe advance secularism (e.g., certain home economics and literature texts) or sought to have their children exempted from exposure to the offending materials. Widely publicized textbook controversies in Mobile, Alabama, and Hawkins County, Tennessee, in the 1980s are cases in point (Bates, 1993; Glenn, 1987). Still other conservative Protestants have forsaken their historic commitment to public schools and looked to the private sector to provide an education congruent with their beliefs or have opted for home education (Carper, 2000; Carper & Weston, 1990; Lewis, 1991).

Since the mid-1960s, fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants and their churches, few of which are affiliated with mainline denominations, have been establishing and patronizing alternatives to public education that are usually referred to as independent Christian day schools or fundamentalist academies. As many as 150 of these institutions were founded between 1920 and 1960 by independent fundamentalist churches and conservative parachurch organizations. It was not until the 1960s, however, that disenchantment with the ongoing secularization of public education, a resurgent evangelical faith, and, in some cases, fears related to desegregation sparked the phenomenal increase in the number of Christian day schools (Carper & Hunt, 1984).

Assessing the early growth of Christian day schools was difficult. Some schools were of such a separatist persuasion that they refused to report enrollment data to state and federal education agencies. For similar reasons, others

chose not to affiliate with any of the national associations of Christian schools that are primary sources of statistics on these institutions. Nevertheless, most scholars now estimate that between 8,000 and 12,000 of these schools have been founded since the mid-1960s. Current enrollment is probably about one million students (K-12) or approximately 20% of all private school students (Carper, 1983; Cooper & Dondero, 1991). Some of these schools have closed their doors. Institutions founded with more enthusiasm than resources and leadership have had short lives. Estimating the number of schools that have closed since the 1960s is as difficult as determining the exact number of schools that have been founded. Many are simply "invisible" and pass from the educational landscape unnoticed. In the mid-1990s, however, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) *estimated* that about 1,100 schools had closed since the mid-1960s.

The most concrete evidence of the growth of the independent Christian school movement can be seen in the membership figures of the largest of several Christian school organizations, the Association of Christian Schools International, which provides legal and legislative services, administrator and teacher support, curriculum, certification and accreditation, and early childhood services to its member schools. The Western Association of Christian Schools, which in 1978 merged with two smaller organizations—the National Christian School Education Association and the Ohio Association of Christian Schools—to form ACSI, claimed a membership in 1967 of 102 schools (K-12) with an enrollment of 14,659. By 1973, the figures were 308 and 39,360, respectively. In 1983, ACSI figures were approximately 1,900 and 270,000; in 1989, 2,347 and 340,626; in 1993; 2,801 and 463,868; and in 2000, 3,849 and 707,928. Despite the fact that some of these schools were founded long before they affiliated with ACSI, these figures testify to the vigor of the Christian day school movement since the 1960s (Association of Christian Schools International, 2001).

Although their rate of growth in the United States slowed between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, some evidence suggests significant enrollment increases during the last years of the decade. Reasons for this increase are not clear. More discretionary income available to potential Christian school patrons and distrust of the Clinton administration's education initiatives may have been contributing factors. Though these schools and their enrollments are unlikely to increase as fast as they did in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, the independent Christian school movement remains one of the more dynamic segments of the American educational enterprise. Furthermore, along with the explosive growth of homeschooling in the 1980s and 1990s, which, though becoming more diverse, is still dominated by evangelical Protestants, this movement marks a significant erosion of conservative Protestants' once nearly universal loyalty to public education (Carper, 2000).

RESEARCH ON INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Scholars have shown considerable interest in these schools since the early 1980s. They have examined the relationship of the aforementioned growth pattern to the evangelical revival and concomitant alienation from American culture and its educational institutions, charges of racial discrimination against these schools, clashes with state officials regarding the legitimacy of state licensing and teacher certification requirements, the quality of Christian day schools compared to their public counterparts, curriculum formats, parent and student characteristics, and various features of these schools (Hunt & Carper, 1993).

Researchers have discovered that although Christian day schools profess the centrality of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible in their educational endeavors, they are quite different in many respects. For example, though most are attached to a local church (ACSI reports that about 85% of its schools fall into this category), a significant minority, often the largest and/or most prestigious, are governed by a local school society or foundation. Facilities range from poorly equipped church basements to modern multi-building campuses. While a majority are elementary schools, an increasing number are offering prekindergarten and secondary education as well. Programs of study vary considerably from standardized, though narrow, to the most comprehensive available anywhere. Enrollments also vary from school to school from as few as 10 to over 2,000. The average enrollment is currently between 150 and 200 (Association of Christian Schools International, 2001; Carper, 1983; Cooper & Dondero, 1991).

Education environments also differ among these institutions. Some Christian school classrooms are reminiscent of those of the public schools of the 1950s, while others resemble Skinnerian learning labs where students work independently through a series of curriculum packets without benefit of a teacher in a conventional sense (the Accelerated Christian Education program or ACE). Many schools use Christian curricula published by Bob Jones University Press, A Beka Books, or ACSI, while others use secular materials and expect instructors to provide Christian perspectives. Some schools mix healthy doses of patriotism with religious instruction. Others shun this practice (Carper & Weston, 1990; Parsons, 1987).

Several excellent ethnographic studies testify to the diversity of institutional climates in Christian day schools. For example, Peshkin's (1986) pioneering study of a fundamentalist Christian high school in central Illinois described the attitudes and behavior of parents, students, teachers, administrators, and pastors who shaped the institution. He concluded that the school well served the educational needs of a fundamentalist Christian community. Rose (1988) compared and contrasted the climate of a fundamentalist Baptist school and that of a school sponsored by a charismatic fellowship. While the former stressed strict rules, routinization, drill, and individual work, the lat-

ter emphasized creativity, flexibility, and group work. In a similar vein, Lewis (1991) examined the ethos of a free school and that of a Christian school. He found that though both embodied a strong dissent from public school culture, the former valued creativity and freedom, while the latter stressed discipline, basics, and religious instruction. After studying a variety of Christian schools affiliated with fundamentalist, charismatic, and mainline evangelical fellowships, Wagner (1990) claimed that the schools had to some extent compromised with American culture. Likewise, Sikkink (2001) identified and described a variety of Christian day schools, including an example of a growing number of "classical" Christian schools whose distinctives often include rigorous instruction in a trivium of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric (often with a base in Latin). In sum, although all Christian day schools are committed to transmitting a Christian worldview, this commitment is embodied in institutions that are remarkably diverse in structure, program, and climate.

ENROLLMENT TRENDS

Increasing minority enrollment and the growing number of what are often called Black Christian academies are also contributing to diversity within the Christian school movement. Although often viewed as stalwart supporters of public education—the arena in which many early civil rights battles were fought—African Americans have often resorted to private or quasipublic schools when public education was unavailable or inadequate. For example, after the American Civil War they established schools in places like Camden, South Carolina, and in the early 20th century contributed significant amounts of time, materials, and money to construction of Rosenwald schools throughout the South (Anderson, 1988).

During the last two decades of the 20th century, Black enrollment in private schools increased steadily. By the late 1990s, approximately 6% of Black elementary and secondary school students were enrolled in nonpublic schools. Some of that increase is evident in the Christian day school sector. Although often stereotyped as "White flight academies," particularly in the South, these institutions do enroll minority students; and their number, though comparatively small, has grown in recent years (Carper & Layman, 1997; Nevin & Bills, 1976; Nordin & Turner, 1980; Skerry, 1980). About 75% of Christian day schools are, to some extent, interracial and about 10% of their enrollment is African American (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; Parsons, 1987).

Of greater significance to both the Christian day school movement and urban public education is the rapid growth of Black Christian academies, mostly located in urban areas, that are initiated, governed, and sustained by African Americans and are not dependent upon organizations outside the Black community. Such schools do, however, identify themselves with con-

temporary evangelical schools. Indeed, many are members of the Association of Christian Schools International. Most Black Christian schools stress racial heritage, discipline, and academic achievement as well as a Christian worldview (Carper & Layman, 1997).

Although the creation of Afrocentric schools has sparked some interest in the scholarly community, only a handful of researchers have paid close attention to the growth and ethos of Black Christian schools. This oversight is, at least in part, due to their "invisibility." Like the predominantly White evangelical schools founded in the 1960s and 1970s, their Black counterparts have been springing up out of the public eye since the early 1980s. They are often unknown to government agencies, public school districts, religious associations, and other usual sources of school statistics. Only the most intrepid of researchers is likely to even locate these institutions (Carper & Layman, 1997).

Using newspaper articles, obscure school directories, word of mouth, and extensive field work, Layman, a veteran student of independent Christian schools, documented at least 200 Black Christian schools located in cities throughout the United States by the early 1990s. He found, for example, over a dozen each in Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC; eight in Baltimore; six in Jackson, Mississippi; and over 30 in greater Los Angeles. During the 1990s, this segment of the Christian school movement continued to expand. In Philadelphia, for example, these schools now number more than 50. As was the case with the schools founded in the 1960s and 1970s, the newer Black Christian schools are marked by great diversity (Layman, 1994). According to Layman (1992):

Many are in their first or second year, while others are veterans; some have modest facilities while others have built new plants or renovated former public schools; some have hundreds of students and others fewer than fifty. Locations range from New York City to Pawley's Island, South Carolina, from inner city "ghettos" to exclusive suburbs. (p. 6)

Though different in many ways, independent Christian schools have much in common. Teachers attempt with varying degrees of success to provide a biblical perspective on their subjects, budgets are tight, prayer is frequent, and missions work receives considerable attention. These educational institutions also experience problems faced by public and other private schools, for example, a teacher struggling for control in the classroom.

As a researcher, I witnessed all of the above during a recent visit to the Ben Lippen (a Scottish phrase for "mountain of trust") School (BLS) in Columbia, South Carolina. Founded in 1940 in Asheville, North Carolina, as a boarding school that primarily served sons of missionaries, Ben Lippen relocated to Columbia in 1988 as a coeducational, college-preparatory school

for both boarding and day students. Since then, a middle school and two satellite elementary schools have been established. More than 900 students from all over the world are enrolled at BLS, about 375 of whom are in the high school.

At 7:30 a.m., I joined faculty members at their regular Friday prayer session. They shared concerns about students who are struggling spiritually, emotionally, academically, and physically. In addition to these students, prayer was offered for Christian teachers in public schools and several families in the community. The session closed with group prayer as individual faculty members called out the names of each student in the sophomore class.

Doors opened at 8:00 a.m., and after 15 minutes of socializing, green-and-tan-clad middle and high school students headed for class. I located a cozy corner of John Smith's first period Courtship, Marriage, and Family class. Effervescent, affable, and student-centered, Smith initially asked each student to predict the score in the Saturday football game between his alma mater, Georgia, and the University of South Carolina. Joshing abounded. From his perch on a stool, he shared bits of church humor and biblical advice, then prayed for a sick class member before quizzing the students on a memory verse. As he was about to start his lecture, perhaps conversation would be a better term, on Philippians, a student arrived very late and tried to sneak to his seat. Smith cried out, "No Nigerians allowed." The class howled as did the tall international student. Compared to most public and private schools in South Carolina, Ben Lippen's student body is quite diverse. More than 20% of the students were internationals or African Americans. Racial and ethnic harmony seems to be the rule at BLS, and Smith's comment and the responses to it confirm that widely held perception.

Smith's comments on love, joy, and peace as he guided students through Philippians revealed another characteristic of Ben Lippen. While academic knowledge is certainly important (the year 2000 median SAT score was over 1,100), so are relationships. Throughout his discussion of Christian life, he stressed the need to depend on the Holy Spirit (a vertical relationship) as a necessary condition for joyous service to and fellowship with others (horizontal relationship).

I then wound my way through a steady stream of talkative but orderly students to my next class, Geometry. After prayer for five or six students and thanks for God's providence at Ben Lippen, Bill Heath, a Johns Hopkins and Columbia Seminary graduate, returned quizzes and, against a backdrop of the Ten Commandments in *Reader's Digest* format and several pieces of Escher art on the front and side walls, quietly reviewed each item. Questions were answered in a low-key fashion. He devoted the last half of the period to the development of "if, then" statements and truth tables. Like all BLS faculty members, Heath integrated the Bible and his academic discipline. For example, he pointed out that Scripture includes many "if, then" statements, most

of which have to do with God's blessing. He asked students to mine the Bible for 50 such statements.

Mike Edwards' World Cultures class was next on my schedule. Welcome to the no-nonsense "real world" of one of Ben Lippen's "thoroughly reformed" instructors. I thought I had been transported back to an early 19th-century academy. Armed with a long pointer in one hand and, paradoxically, a laser pen in the other, maestro Edwards conducted his regular "opening exercises" where a student is called to the front of the room, introduced, and then given a random geography question (What is the capital of the Solomon Islands? Answer: Honiara) for five extra credit points. After the student returned to her seat, he read the entry on the Solomons from *Operation World*, considered by some evangelicals the best current reference work on world missions. Missions are emphasized at Ben Lippen. Indeed, about 20% of the high school students left later in the day for a weekend Student Missionary Fellowship retreat. Edwards devoted the remainder of the time to showing the students how to analyze the sources and biases of information about current events.

My last class of the morning was Religions and Cults, one of several Bible courses from which students must choose one each year, taught by the cerebral Daniel Jansen. After prayer and a Bible memory quiz, he spent most of the period discussing the central principles of Confucianism. Students seemed very interested in Confucian ethics, particularly the Silver Rule, which is similar to the Golden Rule. Jansen concluded the class with speculation regarding Shang Ti or Supreme Ancestor and a possible link to the God of the Bible.

After four hours of class I settled down for a leisurely lunch with Dr. Marion Dawson, the headmaster of Ben Lippen. Though the cafeteria brimmed with students, civility prevailed and raised voices were not necessary for conversation. We chatted about a disgruntled former employee who apparently had a problem accepting duly constituted authority. During our conversation about how the school should handle this problem, Dawson speculated that the devil would like to use this incident to disrupt the progress of the school. I was struck by the ease with which he spoke of a spiritual dimension to what most would consider a mere personnel issue. Seeing matters through the lens of Christian faith sets this school apart from many private, not to mention public, schools.

As I left the cafeteria for a science class I noticed students gathering their gear for the missions trip. They seemed enthusiastic about the weekend retreat in North Carolina. Ninth graders in science class, however, seemed far from enthusiastic. A first-year teacher struggled to keep the class quiet while explaining the agenda for the period. No prayer time or Bible in this class, just a struggle for survival! Once lab began, however, the students settled down.

During the last hour of the day I spoke with a veteran faculty member about the new instructor's struggle. He pointed out that though Friday afternoon might be a factor, he was aware of some of his colleague's difficulties. Several faculty members, he continued, were providing assistance to the new member of the BLS family. Once again, I realized, the faculty and administration of this school make a concerted effort to maintain a tightly-knit community of teachers, parents, and students based on a commitment to helping the family and the church raise children who are committed to Christ and his kingdom.

As I drove home from my day at Ben Lippen, I thought about the lessons I had learned. First, one day at one school is not much of a basis to say anything definitive about the religious identity of evangelical Christian schools. After all, these schools are a diverse lot and I suspect that Ben Lippen is all the more unique due to its history. Nevertheless, BLS shares with all Christian schools a commitment to the centrality of Christ and the authority of the Bible in all aspects of education.

Second, relationships are important at Ben Lippen. While the school has its share of rules and regulations which are foreign to most public and private schools (e.g., no social dancing or handholding on campus), and smack of legalism to some people, BLS works hard at developing both vertical and horizontal Christian relationships.

Finally, faculty members at Ben Lippen consider teaching a calling. Though their salaries are about 70% of those of their public school counterparts, I see a faculty deeply committed to their students' spiritual, emotional, and academic well being. I am sure they would like to be paid more, but complaints are few and far between. At times I wonder if the students at BLS realize the sacrifices their instructors make for them. Like the prophets, teachers are often honored except in their own school.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

What difficulties do these Christ-centered yet diverse institutions face at the dawn of the 21st century? In the 1970s, when Christian schools were multiplying at a rate of more than one per day, their leaders were preoccupied with problems such as how to get started, adequate facilities, and methods of discipline. Administrators also wrestled with articulating a philosophy of Christian school education and legal and legislative challenges, (e.g., their right to exist and the extent to which the schools were answerable to state regulatory agencies) (Carper, 1982).

As the Christian school movement has matured, many of those issues have been partially resolved. Weaker schools have closed, while others have become better managed and equipped. Schools know why they exist and are able, perhaps more clearly than any other segment of formal education in the

United States, to articulate their philosophy. Furthermore, their right to exist and degree of government control have been largely settled in most states. Legal and legislative concerns are shifting to issues such as employment policies and state and federal involvement in child care.

The most pressing concerns now facing Christian day school leaders are those of financial stability and spiritual vitality. In the heady early days, starting a school was an enthusiastic crusade marked by volunteered time and money, but now come the more mundane realities of student and teacher recruitment and annual budgets. As school programs broaden and as expenditures for public education escalate, particularly for teacher salaries, the Christian schools are facing more costly expectations. They are responding by establishing development offices and looking for ways to ensure their long-term viability. Nevertheless, many schools live "close to the edge."

These financial challenges are clearly reflected in three areas. First, since Christian school income derives primarily from tuition, maintaining school enrollment is crucial. Many schools face less than subtle pressures to seek and accept students from families that do not share their philosophy in order to maintain necessary enrollment levels. This, however, threatens to compromise Christian education distinctives. Second, the recruitment of teachers is becoming a major problem. Although many Christians are still eager to have a teaching ministry, increased pressure to maintain living standards, the widening salary gap with the public sector, and a nationwide shortage of teachers in several critical areas make recruiting and retaining quality instructors increasingly difficult for many schools. Third, the strain to meet operating budgets makes it exceptionally difficult to raise capital funds for buildings and other initiatives. Given the uncertain long-term prospects for the national economy, these challenges are not likely to subside in the near future.

Although preoccupation with financial matters is considerable, concern over the spiritual vitality of the schools is even greater. In the early days of the movement, leaders were confident that Christian schools would contribute to a Christian revival, as an army of young people benefited from the combined nurturing of home, church, and school. Evidence of this revival, particularly in regard to teenage lifestyles is scanty (Gibbs, 1991). Indeed, Christian education, in itself, is no panacea, and the Christian schools are more likely to *reflect* than to *determine* the spiritual levels of their constituency.

As can readily be seen from the discussion above, the maturation of the Christian day school is fraught with pitfalls. Balancing spiritual and financial concerns is a particularly delicate matter. Too much emphasis on the former may lead to public embarrassment as bills go unpaid and teachers eke out a living. Preoccupation with the latter, on the other hand, is the kiss of death for any Christian institution.

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