



Highlighting the latest findings in Christian education research
to inform best practice in Christian schools

SPRING 2020
Volume 1 • Issue 2

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ACSI's Flourishing Schools Research 2019 NATIONAL FINDINGS

LYNN E. SWANER & CHARLOTTE A. MARSHALL

Schools today operate in an era of heightened accountability for educational outcomes, measured predominantly via standardized testing. Because of their faith foundation, Christian schools count academic achievement as a paramount aim, but not an exclusive one. In such an era, and particularly for Christian schools, “flourishing” offers a more expansive view of the purposes and processes of education.

Throughout scripture the concept of flourishing is used to describe a state of being—one that always results from God’s work with and upon communities of faith. The psalmist invokes the blessing in the Old Testament, “May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children” (Psalm 115:14). This blessing echoes in the words of Jesus when He told His disciples, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10b). It also manifests in Jesus’ promise that, “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit” (John 15:5b). Inherent in these scriptures is a picture of how through Christ, communities of faith can flourish—to the benefit of both adults and children alike. As communities of faith, Christian schools and all their members can likewise flourish.

While flourishing holds promise in terms of describing a desired condition and outcome of Christian education, key questions need to be answered if Christian schools are to realize this promise—namely, how do Christian schools flourish? What elements of school culture contribute to flourishing, and do some elements matter more than others? Is there a roadmap to school flourishing that can be validated by empirical research in Christian schools? In 2018, ACSI Research sought to answer these questions through rigorous research on Christian school cultures, by using a new research tool—the Flourishing School Culture Instrument (FSCI). The resulting research is groundbreaking both in terms of its scope and findings. The

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

Spring 2020 | Volume 1, Number 2

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Published two times each year by the Association of Christian Schools International.

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ACSI Vision Statement

ACSI will become a leading international organization that promotes Christian education and provides training and resources to Christian schools and Christian educators, resulting in:

- schools that contribute to the public good through effective teaching and learning and that are biblically sound, academically rigorous, socially engaged, and culturally relevant and
- educators who embody a biblical worldview, engage in transformational teaching and discipling, and embrace personal and professional growth.

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following summary of this research is based on the national report, [Flourishing Schools: Research on Christian School Culture and Community](#) (Swaner, Marshall and Tesar 2019), which is available for download at acsi.org/flourishingschools.

Methodology

Questions for the FSCI were formulated based on catalogued findings from an extensive review of relevant research and literature, as well as findings from a meta-analysis of leading Christian schools' expected student outcomes (ESOs), which fell into six major domains (spiritual, academic, community, excellence, impact, and servanthood). In total, the FSCI tested 1,445 discrete variables across seven different survey groups: students; parents; alumni; teachers; leaders/administrators; support staff; and board members. Additionally, data on student achievement for 41 of the 65 schools in the sample was obtained from the ACSI Student Assessment Program (of that number, TerraNova data was obtained for 20 schools and Iowa Assessment data was obtained for 1 school).

Between Fall 2018 and Spring 2019, total of 15,189 completed responses were received from a purposive sampling of 65 Christian schools of diverse size and geographic location (distribution across groups as indicated in Table 1). The sample size makes the FSCI the largest study of flourishing in Christian schools to date. The SPSS statistical package was used to conduct data analysis, as follows:

Reliability and validity were tested for FSCI items to produce a final subset of the original pre-validated questions, resulting in a psychometrically sound instrument. For reliability, Cronbach's Alpha for group question sets ranged from .544 to .882, with six out of the seven groups measuring over .78; for validity, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy ranged from .724 to .879, with six out of the seven groups measuring over .8.

Construct identification was conducted using established best practice benchmarks for measuring latent constructs. This involved factor analysis using the Principal Component Analysis method of extraction to confirm the aggregation of the question items in their dimension components. The number of constructs for each group's assessment was determined by striving to maximize total variance explained by the fewest number of components, with the optimal number of constructs determined by calculating eigenvalues for the data set and specifically exploring where eigenvalues dropped below 1. The final number of constructs accepted for each assessment explains between 64.9 – 69.5% of overall variance. Principal Component Analysis using Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation method yielded a structure where

Survey Group	Number of Responses	% Male	% Female	% of Color
Students (6–12 th grades)	7,381	Data not collected	Data not collected	Data not collected
Parents	4,291	28%	72%	19%
Alumni	1,340	41%	59%	14%
Teachers	1,322	23%	77%	11%
Leaders/Administrators (School Head Subset)	226 (65)	41% (63%)	59% (37%)	6% (4%)
Support Staff	413	9%	91%	12%
Board Members	216	63%	37%	10%

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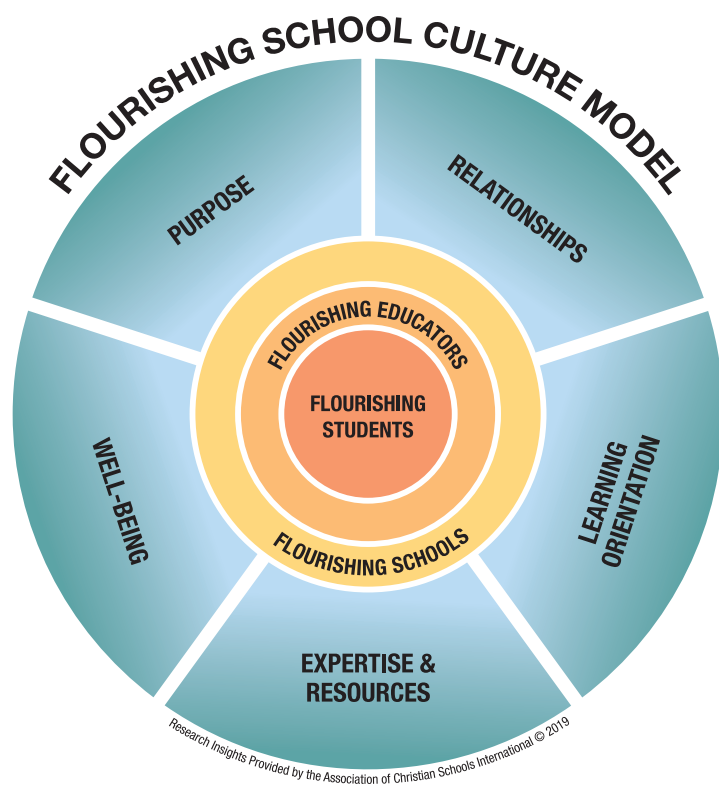
Table 1. Response Numbers and Demographics of FSCI Survey Groups

all individual question items yielded primary loadings over .5, and not a single item yielded cross-loading above .3. The validated constructs identified through FSCI data analysis were mapped onto the first ever research-based model of Christian school flourishing—the Flourishing School Culture Model (FSCM).

Linkages to outcomes were identified using structural equation modeling (SEM) and logistic regression techniques. These techniques enable the model to be used to predict changes in desired outcomes if or when changes are made related to underlying latent constructs. The outcomes initially revealed by the model should not be confused with correlation relationships, which have no power to predict future outcomes. One outcome included in this predictive analysis was student performance on standardized testing, though additional outcomes related to student retention, durability of student faith, and more were included in this robust outcomes exploration phase. In the end, various constructs across the model were found to have strong and specific predictive value for one or more meaningful flourishing outcomes.

The Flourishing School Culture Model (FSCM)

The FSCM clusters the validated constructs for all seven survey groups into five domains of flourishing: *Purpose*; *Relationships*; *Learning Orientation*; *Expertise and Resources*; and *Well-Being*.



These domains are fully detailed in the Flourishing Schools research national report, [Flourishing Schools: Research on Christian School Culture and Community](#), but are summarized briefly below.

Purpose. A commitment on the part of all school constituencies to the central purposes of Christian education—such as holistic teaching, integrated worldview, spiritual formation, discipleship, and family-school partnership—are strongly predictive of flourishing outcomes. Predictive constructs for Purpose are:

- Responsibility
- Holistic Teaching
- Integrated Worldview
- God’s Story (Students)
- Questioning (Students)
- Partnership
- Spiritual Formation



Relationships. Trust-filled, supportive, and authentic relationships between all school constituencies, as well as with the surrounding community, are key to flourishing outcomes (e.g., between leaders and teachers, leaders and the board, parents and teachers, teachers and students, students and peers, school leadership and the community, and the school itself with the community). Predictive constructs for Relationships are:

- Supportive Leadership
- Leadership Interdependence
- Parent Relationships
- Community Engagement
- Mentoring Students
- Insular Culture
- Christlike Teachers
- Prosocial Orientation
- Caring Environment



Learning Orientation. A school culture in which educators are committed to ongoing learning and improvement is predictive of flourishing not only for the school and educators, but also for students. For teachers, this includes best practices in feedback and collaboration, high quality professional development, and individualized instruction. For school leadership, this entails using systems thinking to develop a culture of improvement, which is both focused on student outcomes and is data driven. Predictive constructs for Learning Orientation are:

- Feedback
- Collaboration
- Systems Thinking
- Data-Driven Improvement
- Professional Development
- Outcomes Focus
- Culture of Improvement
- Individualized Instruction



Expertise & Resources. Flourishing is connected to excellence in educational and school management practices. Educationally, this includes hiring qualified staff, providing effective and orderly classroom environments where students are deeply engaged in learning, and responding effectively to special needs. Sufficient school resources—as well as board-level strengths in resource planning—are predictive of school flourishing, as are (conversely) resource constraints that hinder schools from engaging in improvement processes.

Predictive constructs for Expertise and Resources are:

- Best Practice Orientation
- Engaged Learning
- Classroom Management
- Responsiveness to Special Needs
- Qualified Staff
- Resources
- Resource Planning
- Resource Constraints



Well-Being. For both leaders and teachers at Christian schools, stress is a key factor that impacts flourishing; likewise, healthy living and developing resilience is predictive of student flourishing. This domain and related constructs demonstrate that the well-being of educators and students is not a secondary concern—but rather is



predictively linked—to flourishing outcomes. Predictive constructs for Well-Being are:

- Stress
- Healthy Living
- Resilience

Taken together, these five domains provide a compelling and comprehensive picture of the areas in which Christian schools can focus their efforts and resources in order to promote a flourishing school culture and community.

Linkages with Outcomes

Analysis of connections between these domains and specific flourishing outcomes supported many of the school improvement practices typically undertaken in Christian schools (e.g., improving staff qualifications through hiring practices, promoting student well-being, responding well to students’ learning needs, providing ample classroom resources, and ensuring teachers develop caring relationships with students).

Some findings, however, suggested schools pursue other efforts to promote flourishing—such as leaders’ engaging the larger community, ensuring teachers are oriented toward best practice, and promoting teachers’ engagement of students in deeper learning—with unexpected yet strong linkages to outcomes like spiritual formation and reduced teacher turnover. These linkages are discussed in detail in the national report, with a selection of key linkages presented in Table 2, below.

Outcome	Input	Measurement	Statistical Strength
Academic (Students)	Expertise & Resources: Rigorous hiring standards	Higher student math scores	4.8x more likely
	Expertise & Resources: Board reports that the school has adequate resources	Higher overall test scores	2.4x more likely
	Expertise & Resources: School is responsive to special needs of students	Students have higher reading scores	1.6x more likely
	Well-Being: Students report being physically healthy	Higher overall test scores	1.3x more likely
Spiritual (Students & Alumni)	Relationships: Leaders/administrators engage the surrounding community	Alumni more likely to report they’re currently walking with God	2.4x more likely
	Expertise & Resources: Teachers oriented toward best practice	Alumni more likely to report they’re currently walking with God	1.8x more likely
	Expertise & Resources: School is responsive to special needs of students	Alumni more likely to report they’re currently walking with God	1.5x more likely
	Relationships: Students confirm their teachers care about them	Alumni more likely to report they’re currently walking with God	1.3x more likely
Staff Turnover (Teachers)	Expertise & Resources: Teachers report not having the classroom resources they need	Staff turnover rates	Significantly <i>higher</i>
	Purpose: Teachers report helping students engage in their learning (develop critical thinking and problem solving)	Staff turnover rates	Significantly <i>lower</i>

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Table 2. Predictive Relationships Between Inputs and Outcomes of a Flourishing Culture

Future Steps

Future FSCI administrations, beginning in early spring 2020, will strengthen both the usefulness of findings for schools and the data set that informs the predictive nature of the FSCI. In addition to the national findings, participating schools receive a detailed report that identifies their school's unique strengths, opportunities for growth, and benchmark scores against the national data set (schools that are interested in the 2020 administration of the FSCI can visit acsi.org/flourishingschools).

Additional reports in 2020 will further unpack leadership constructs that are predictive of school flourishing, as well as examine linkages between flourishing and parent, student, and alumni satisfaction data. In the meantime, the national report shares initial FSCI findings and the FSCM model for Christian educators which, when taken together, provide measurable signposts on a roadmap toward flourishing Christian schools. **RIB**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS — Dr. Lynn Swaner is the Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer at ACSI, where she leads initiatives and develops strategies to address compelling questions and challenges facing Christian education. Prior to joining ACSI she served as a Christian school administrator and a graduate professor of education. Dr. Swaner serves as a Cardus Senior Fellow and is the lead editor of the books *MindShift: Catalyzing Change in Christian Education* and *PIVOT: New Directions for Christian Education*, co-author of *Bring It to Life: Christian Education and the Transformative Power of Service-Learning*, and editor of the ACSI blog. She received her EdD from Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City.

Dr. Charlotte Marshall is the Senior Researcher at ACSI. Her background includes a decade of research examining individual and community well-being in academic, corporate, and church communities. Deeply rooted in Christian values, she has an ability to lead research projects strategically and empathetically. Prior to joining ACSI, she served as a professor of psychology and academic researcher.

Reference

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Research on Inclusion and Belonging in Christian Schools

JULIE M. LANE & QUENTIN KINNISON

“As we welcome students with different learning abilities, we participate as ambassadors in God’s reconciling work, which results in our lives being transformed by God.”

This line from our most recent grant proposal is an important framework for the research work we have engaged for nearly a decade. We operate from a belief that God invites us to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation, and one way to participate is through the welcome and inclusion of students affected by disability. Our research agenda has been driven by discovering ways in which theology, practical theory and legal requirements, and actual practice meet to create schools where inclusion takes place.

Of particular interest to us are Christian schools who have taken this invitation as an opportunity for the development and growth of all students and who see students affected by disability as a blessing rather than a challenge. Our text, *Welcoming Children with Special Needs: Empowering Christian Educators through Purpose, Policy, and Procedures* (Lane and Kinnison 2014) provides foundational information for such schools. Yet, it lacked exemplar schools and a guide for Christian schools to self-evaluate their current practices and culture.

We wanted to identify and understand what a Christian school looks like when it creates a culture of inclusion, belonging, and hospitality (Lane et al. 2019). In January 2016, we received funding through the Louisville Institute



Pastoral Research Grant to identify three exemplar schools serving children with disabilities in the western US. Over the course of eighteen months, potential study sites were studied and identified. Julie visited each site for two to three days interviewing teachers, administrators, and parents of children with disabilities and parents of children that did not require special education services. Julie also observed classroom instruction, breaks, lunch, and before and after school interactions.

Assumptions

In the beginning, we had two educational assumptions about the study. First, we assumed we could easily identify

schools serving children in an inclusive culture reflective of belonging and hospitality. While we found many Christian schools providing services for children with disabilities, children received these support services outside of the school day or by taking the child out of their general education classroom to work with a parent, tutor, or special education teacher. Coordination between general education teachers and those working directly with these children seemed lacking. Special education programming was looked at as separate from general education teacher responsibilities and the challenges of teaching these children were left to the parent, tutor, or specialist. This is not to say these steps to serve children with disabilities should be dismissed. Rather, that all formats of learning should lead towards creating cultures where all of God's children are included, served, and belong.

A second educational assumption concerned perceptions that Christian general education teachers' lack of training or willingness to be trained to serve children with disabilities (Bacon and Erickson 2010; Bello 2006; Cookson and Smith 2011; Lane 2017; Pudas 2004; Scanlon 1998; Taylor 2005). Our study discovered just the opposite. We were pleasantly surprised how teaching staff at the three sites were eager to learn pedagogical approaches and behavior supports to better serve students with disabilities.

Theological Themes

We also identified important theological themes shaping our work (Lane and Kinnison 2014). The first regards theodicy. Too often the question "why" takes central place in conversations about disability and perceived suffering. As we have framed it, this is a pastoral care question more than a theological one. By attending to it as such—as a question of how to best love and serve children with disabilities—we can care well for students and families without some of the damage that comes with incomplete or simplistic answers as to why God permits disability or perceived suffering.

Second, developing a robust theology of humanity starts by understanding God as the Triune God of the Bible. The interconnectedness of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit based in divine love provides a framework for understanding how being made in God's image (*Imago Dei*) shapes humans for connection with one another. It is this need and desire for connection that is damaged or destroyed in the fall (a third theme) and which leads to isolation and segregation people affected by disability encounter in most places, including school. The human brokenness created by our rebellion leads to greater brokenness, especially in the lives of those who are most unable to "fake" or approximate a perceived "normalcy" presented by society (Reynolds 2008). Often, students with disabilities and their families experience isolation, loneliness, and rejection.

Third, in response to our brokenness and the sinful ways humans foster such isolation, God responds with restoration and reconciliation. God, in Christ, is restoring *shalom* (peace, wholeness, well-being, flourishing) to creation by reconciling us to God and us to each other. In this mission, God invites followers to become Ambassadors of the Kingdom that brings such *shalom*. Our work as ambassadors becomes a means which we participate with God in God's work and give witness to God's reconciling activity through Christ establishing communities that reflect the Kingdom's values.

This fourth theme is expressed by full inclusion of people affected by disability, recognizing they are also bearers of the Gospel and are ambassadors of the Kingdom. Full inclusion of students with disabilities (and all persons affected by disability) allows the community to receive the gift of their wisdom, service, and love, which are God's gifts to the community through them. Finally, by empowering and promoting such participation, Christian schools become signposts of the Gospel's transforming power in our world: "salt" and "light" witnesses to God's work in Christ to redeem broken people and broken relationships.

Other Supporting Research

Julie's passion for understanding special education programming grew through her work in K-12 education and through her consulting opportunities. She has helped and observed Christian schools create their own programs to serve children with and without disabilities. In reality, many Christian schools are serving children affected by disability, but little research exists on current practices, let alone best practices.

To first understand current practices, Julie investigated the enrollment of children with disabilities in Christian schools. Based on 240 participants across the U.S., Lane and Jones (2015a) found Christian schools most often serve children identified with speech and language disorders (83.7%), attention deficit disorder specific learning disabilities (67.4%), and autism (58.1%). The study found the larger the enrollment of a Christian school, the more likely the school served a higher per capita of children affected by disability (Lane and Jones 2015b).

Lane and Jones (2015a) also sought to understand the *child find* activities for which public schools are responsible to all private schools within their district boundaries. *Child find* activities are the public school's responsibility to "locate, identify, and evaluate all children with disabilities who are enrolled by their parents in private (including religious) elementary and secondary schools located in a school district" (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.131>). *Child find* activities must be conducted each fall in collaboration with private school representatives. Lane and Jones (2015a) found a minimal understanding of *child find* and a lack of

knowledge about how *child find* activities are conducted. Determined to research further, as of this writing Lane and Jones are analyzing data to understand steps taken by public and private school educators to complete *child find* activities and to identify barriers that exist between public and private school personnel when conducting these activities.

In 2017, Julie's research again examined current enrollment of children affected by disability in Christian schools, but also was expanded to gain insight on special education staffing and what service models were being used (Lane 2017). Of the 319 participants from across the U.S., the top four categories served in Christian schools are other health impaired (89.1%), specific learning disabilities (78.1%), speech and language disorders (72%), and autism (68.3%). Of great concern from the data collected were the number of Christian schools serving children with disabilities with no staff members (53.2%) trained in the field of disability. Special education programming often reflected public school resource programming, yet 45% of respondents indicated children with disabilities were only served in the general education classroom by the general education teacher.

Findings with Potential for Implementation

In Lane, Kinnison, and Ellard's (2019) research of "exemplar" special education programs, we found in the schools studied that each had **catalytic experiences** exposing the need for special education. While our research would not permit us to insist there is uniform pattern, there appear to be a pattern of overlapping realizations that foster the need to act. One significant catalyst occurs when parents of multiple children expressed disappointment, sorrow, or regret that their child with a disability would not receive the benefits of the unique environment the Christian school provided their child that does not require special education services. This lament of parents who would separate their children and rely upon the public system for meeting their child's special education needs creates a crisis in the schools where change occurs. This crisis seems connected to both awareness that providing such care falls squarely within the school's mission and theological belief, and that as followers of Christ, the school has a responsibility to respond to the need.

Second, the development and continued success of a special education program lies in the **mind and heart of the program's director**. Special education program directors must have a vision for the program and the administrative skills to build the program, which also must be founded in directors' having the training and skill set to effectively serve children with disabilities. Directors need a passion for serving children with disabilities and energy to go above and beyond in advocating for their students. Bringing other staff members into the work while equipping colleagues with innovative teaching instructions, including differentiated instruction, is essential. Partnering with children without



disabilities helps to build belonging among classmates while teaching compassion, understanding, patience, and God's image in each of us. [Authors' note: we recognize not all Christian schools have the funding to hire full-time directors to champion such programs. Schools often start small by hiring part-time champions to serve their schools once a week or in after-school programs. Christian schools can also work together to hire an itinerate staff member serving multiple Christian schools in the same area].

The role of **leadership** in this research was a significant third observation. As will be discussed further in a moment, the logistical pressures of embracing special education at the Christian school are very real. We identified that following the lead of a champion, the hearts and minds of leadership at the administration and board level was essential. In interviews with principals, board chairs, and other associated leadership at Christian schools (pastors etc.), it became apparent their willingness to embrace the vision of inclusion put forth by the champion and parents promotes success. These leaders do more than assent to the idea; they embrace it and actively participate in making inclusion of students with disabilities a priority.

As reported in Lane and Jones (2015), Lane (2017), and the present study, **funding** for disability programs is challenging. Schools often ask if they should raise tuition for all so that all have access to the program or to charge each individual family as they receive services. Added expenses raising a child with disabilities, such as paying a higher tuition, is challenging. Therefore, a fourth observation recognizes Christian school personnel need to engage creative fundraising and grant writing to support their program's needs. Special education staff need to be aware of the requirements of public schools for *child find*. They also need to know about potential funding from the public schools by way of *child find* as presented in the way of services or professional development. And, they should take advantage of federal funding through Title II, Part A and Title V, Part A.

These sections provide benefits to private school students and teachers.

Finally, inclusion as an ideal and as a practice is **widely embraced** across the school's various populations. Throughout the interviewing process, stories emerged of ways in which children without disabilities became co-learners with children with disabilities as they worked together. All students found they were being changed or formed in more Christlike and loving ways. Similar stories emerged of teachers and administrators who were changed by what they learned from students with and without disabilities caring for one another in meaningful friendships. Additionally, families of students with and without disabilities identified important formation that resulted from the inclusive environment, as well as mutual support and encouragement.

Conclusion

Our study identified Riverside Christian School in Yakima, WA, St. Madeleine Sophie Catholic School in Bellevue, WA, and Faith Lutheran Middle School and High School in Las Vegas, NV as exemplar schools in serving all of God's children. Their leadership teams and the heart and mind of their special education program directors have each created a culture where all children are included, belong, and are served with a hospitable manner.

We seek to understand our mindfulness as to God's mission in *shalom*, and consider how we can be encouraged to think about how we include people affected by disability. To continue this journey, as of this writing, we have submitted a second grant request to continue our work in identifying Christian schools whose culture embraces inclusion, belonging, and hospitality. We who have been welcomed by

God in our openness, should welcome others. We too should participate in God's work of reconciliation. [RIB](#)

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Quentin Kinnison, Ph.D. is an associate professor of Christian Ministry and Chair of the Biblical & Religious Studies division at Fresno Pacific University. His research is focused on congregations and leadership, disability ministry, and grief.

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BY THE NUMBERS: How ACSI Schools Serve Students with Special Needs

CHARLOTTE A. MARSHALL

How are ACSI schools responding to meet the evolving needs of our students? In order to explore this question, this year's annual ACSI Tuition and Salary Survey asked schools about if and how they provide programs and services for students with special needs. With 746 schools responding (29% response rate), the sample of schools is representative of ACSI membership across a number of factors (e.g., geographic location, enrollment size, etc.).

We asked schools specific questions about individualized education program options offered and student participation in those options, namely: Special Education; Gifted/Talented/Honors; Physical Disabilities; and Trade/Vocational programs. Approximately half of responding schools indicated they offered one or more of these

options. Table 1 highlights the breakdown of these results by program/service.

Table 1: Special Needs Programs and Student Participation

Individualized Education Programs or Services	Schools with Program or Service	Median Percent of Student Population Participating
Special Education	35%	7% of students
Gifted / Talented / Honors	33%	11% of students
Physical Disabilities	6%	1% of students
Trade / Vocational	4%	5% of students

In addition to this data, the survey asked for more specific information on the types of special education programs and services schools provided to students. For the nearly 50% of schools in the sample who offer special education programs and services, the results are shared in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Specific Special Education Programs and Services Offered

Special Education Programs and Services	Responding Schools with Program or Service
Accommodations (HOW learning)	63%
Modifications (WHAT learning)	49%
Inclusion Classroom(s)	31%
Resource Classroom(s)	29%
Paraprofessional Support	28%
Assistive Technology	17%
Self-Contained Classroom(s)	11%

We also asked questions about the overall availability and accessibility of special education services in ACSI schools, and found that 40% of respondents have students whose needs exceed/are not met by their special education offerings. We also found that of the schools responding to the question (n=128), 55% reported charging additional fees for services. Both of these findings suggest that there is room to improve in Christian schools in terms of meeting students' special needs, as well as making services and programs more accessible to families regardless of financial ability to pay.

In order to help schools better serve students with special needs, as well as move toward providing tuition equity for these students and their families, ACSI is partnering on a number of initiatives with All Belong (<https://allbelong.org/>), an organization that provides consultation and support for schools seeking to become inclusive communities for learners of all abilities. Readers can expect to see helpful resources, developed through this partnership, rolled out in 2020. [RiB](#)

Christian School Leadership 2019 ACSI Profile

LYNN E. SWANER & JAY FERGUSON

In spring and summer 2019, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) invited over 2500 member schools to participate in the annual ACSI Tuition and Salary Survey (<https://www.acsi.org/school-services/research>). The survey included a number of questions related to the profile of Christian school heads, including in the areas of leader demographics, education and compensation, and hiring and tenure. This article shares related findings and discusses implications for each category.

Survey Background

A total of 746 member schools (705 in the U.S. and 41 international schools) responded to the survey invitation, representing a 29% response rate. Data was collected via an online survey platform from May 1 to July 18, 2019. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, with the overall margin of error calculated at +/- 3.02%.

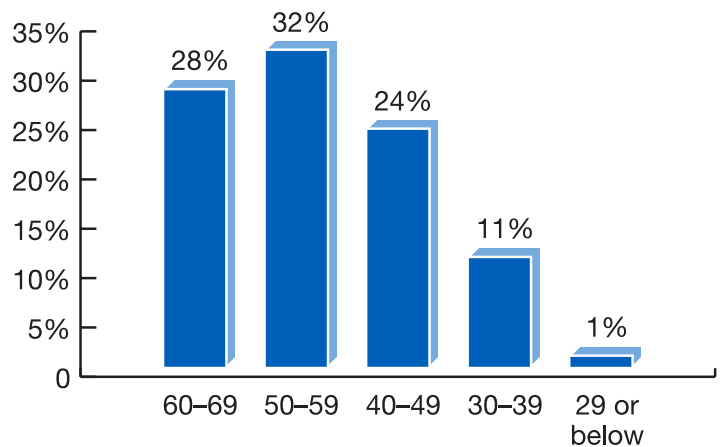
Of the responding heads of school, 41% serve at an independent Christian school, while 59% work at church-affiliated schools. A third (33%) of school heads are employed at accredited schools. [Note that for both metrics, the survey sample is fairly representative of ACSI membership].

Leader Demographics

Leader Age: The distribution of age ranges for current heads

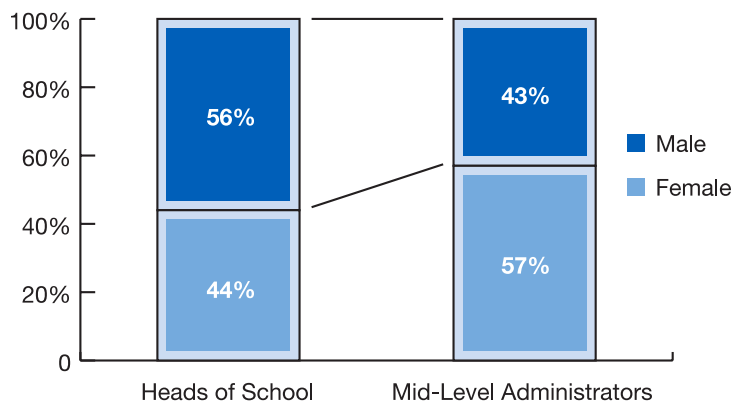
of school is skewed toward 50 years and above, with 60% of current school heads falling within this range. With 28% aged 60-69 and 32% aged 50-59, this suggests that nearly half of current Christian school leaders will be at or near what has been traditionally considered retirement age in the coming decade.

Age Ranges of Current School Heads



Gender: Of current heads of school, 56% are male, and 44% female. However, at the next layer of administration (e.g., principals, assistant heads, directors), this ratio is reversed; 57% of next-tier administrators are female, whereas 43% are male (at the 50% percentile).

Gender Distribution by Leadership Level

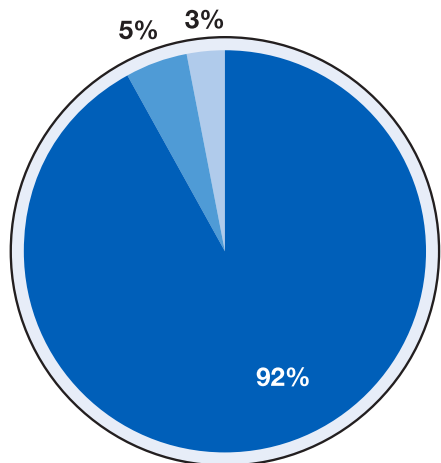


Race/Ethnicity: Although data on race and ethnicity among Christian school staff was not disaggregated by role, there is an overall lack of diversity among Christian school educators. At the 50th percentile, 3% of staff were African American, 4% Latino/Hispanic, and 82% Caucasian/White.

Discussion: One of the primary implications of the current study was a lack of diversity among Christian school educators. In the reporting Christian schools, the staff race/ethnicity profile tends to be heavily skewed toward Caucasians/Whites. Additionally, a narrower pathway for the transition of women from the mid-level leadership level to the head of school level is another phenomenon evident the survey data: whereas 57% of second-tier school leaders are female, only 44% are male.

To address this, school leaders and boards should develop diversity-enhancing strategies within their schools that more closely mirror the body of Christ and their surrounding communities, not only to better reflect God's Kingdom, but also to help ensure long-term sustainability with an increasingly diverse population. This will require closely examining ex-

Race and Ethnicity of Staff (at 50th Percentile)



■ Caucasian/White ■ Latino/Hispanic ■ African American/Black

PLICIT and implicit assumptions or biases that may be undermining recruitment and hiring of diverse candidates, as well as precluding high-quality leadership from having opportunities for advancement within a given school structure.

Finally, the fact that nearly one-third of heads of schools surveyed are nearing what has traditionally been considered retirement age, with another third in such position within 10-15 years, suggests the strong need for leadership development and succession planning strategies. These strategies should target emerging leaders for professional development, mentoring, and networking opportunities, both inside the school community and in the broader sphere of Christian schools and private education. Current heads and boards also need to cultivate a vision for ministry and sense of calling that transcends their tenure at the school, so as to create appropriate mindsets to be active participants in the leadership development and succession planning processes.

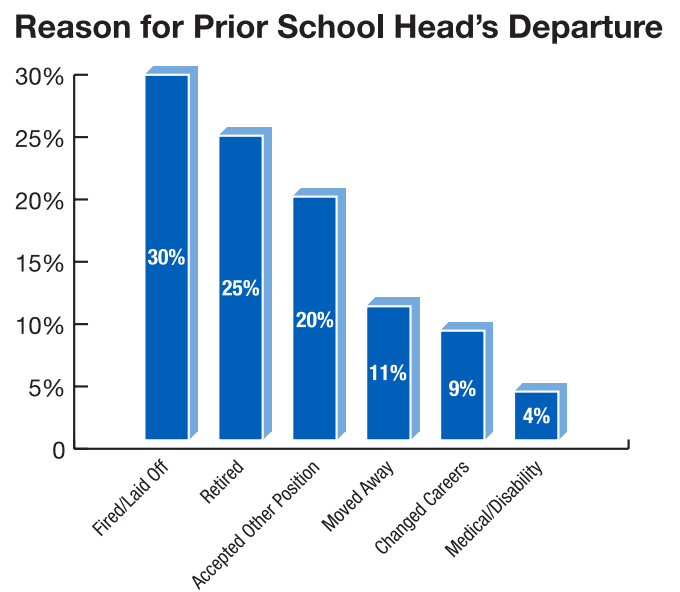
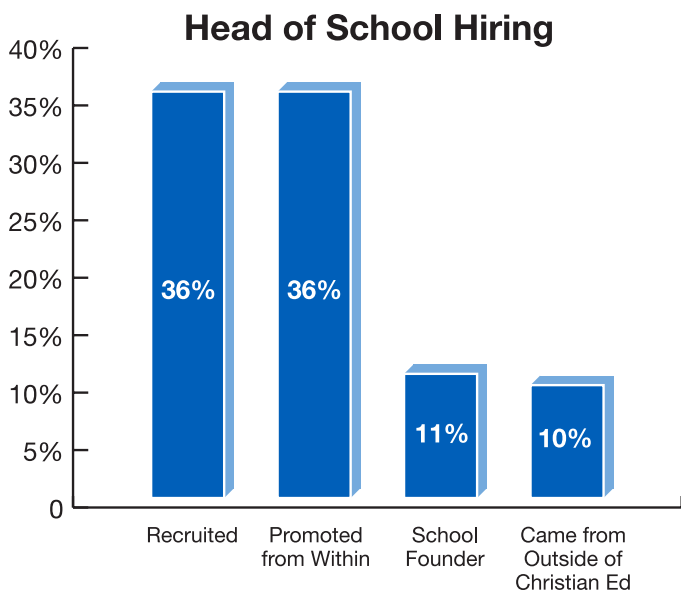
Leader Education and Compensation

Education: In terms of highest level of degree attained, the majority of school heads (63%) hold a master's degree. Another 19% have earned a doctorate or professional degree. Thus, over 80% of school heads hold an advanced degree beyond the bachelor's.

Compensation: The median head of school annual salary, across all school sizes, is \$63,000. When examined by school size, however, school leader compensation rises along with enrollment. Specifically, median head of school compensation at schools based on school size is as follows: up to 100 students is \$37,023; 201-400 students is \$55,000; 401-700 students is \$88,950; and 701 or more students is \$146,065.

Discussion: One particularly poignant implication of this study is the undercompensation of the head of school in the Christian schools surveyed, relative to their counterparts in other types of schooling. According to the [American Association of School Administrators](#), the average annual compensation for public school superintendents is \$125,096, while the [National Association of Independent Schools](#) reports median head of school annual compensation in other independent schools as \$225,000. For Christian school heads, the work is not any easier than in their public school or independent school counterparts. If anything, the work of a Christian head of school is more complex, given the pastoral/spiritual leadership responsibilities not required of other positions.

The relatively low compensation in private Christian schools is concerning for multiple reasons. First, it sets a normative ceiling of systemically low compensation across the organizations surveyed. Where the head of school is undercompensated, other administrators and teachers will most likely be undercompensated, as well. Second, given the previously mentioned advancing age of surveyed heads of schools, undercompensation will likely result in school boards having



increasing difficulty in recruiting and securing qualified school heads for their positions. And third, undercompensation can also contribute to greater head of school turnover, which creates systemic cultural and consistency issues associated with a “rotating door” of school leadership. Indeed, there may be a connection between the relative undercompensation of heads surveyed and the relatively short tenure findings, discussed below.

Leader Hiring and Tenure

Hiring: Current heads of school were recruited from other educational positions outside the school and promoted from within at the same rate (36%). Another 11% are the founders of their current school, and 10% came to their role from outside of Christian education (e.g., from church or other ministry, business or industry, etc.).

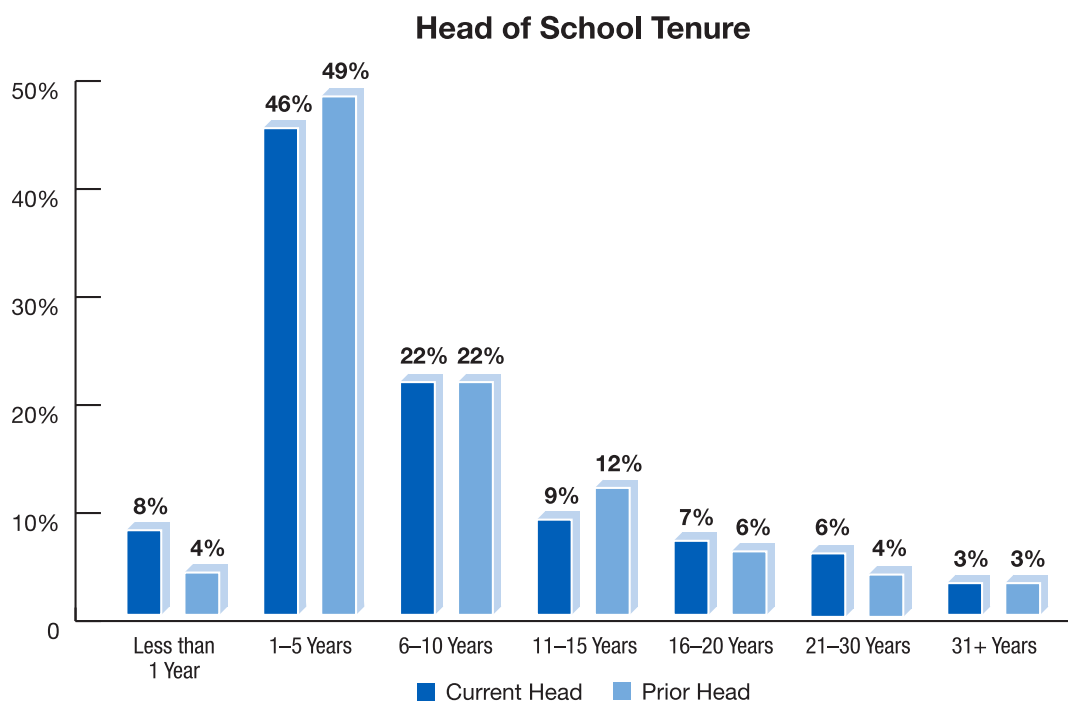
In regard to the departure of the *prior* head of school, heads were most likely to have been fired or laid off (at 30%). An additional quarter of prior heads of school retired from the role.

Tenure: Nearly half of all heads of school (46%) have served at their current schools for five years or less, and the statistic for the preceding heads of school was similar (49%). The next largest category of heads are those who have served for 6-10 years at the school, at 22% for both current and prior heads of school.

Discussion: The survey data suggests relatively high turnover at the head of school position, with

the majority of both current and prior school heads serving five years or less. By comparison, according to the [National Association of Independent Schools](#), the average tenure of heads of other private schools is 12.6 years (with their predecessors at 13.1 years). This is a somewhat alarming comparison, when coupled with data suggesting that nearly a third of Christian school heads are fired from their positions.

Given the high financial, emotional, and organizational cost of replacing the head of school, as well as the challenges of securing strong replacement candidates as discussed earlier, school boards and their heads should determine clear metrics as to what constitutes success within the school context, and to agree to let those metrics govern school and leadership success. They should also engage intentionally in professional development regarding healthy conflict resolution.



With regard to hiring, 46% of all heads of school were hired from outside their respective organizations (either from other schools or industries), as opposed to 36% who were promoted within. This finding suggests a need for school leadership and governing bodies to engage in healthy leadership development practices within their schools, by raising up the next generation of leaders and compensating those leaders fairly so as to keep them in the school long enough to serve as the next generation of school leadership.

Conclusion

On the whole, the results of the survey indicate that many schools are not yet engaging in best practices that contribute to long-term school sustainability—such as benchmarking salaries of teachers and administrators to local or other relevant standards with the goal of ensuring a high-quality, committed staff; and, engaging in the leadership development and school board training practices necessary to ensure strong healthy board/head relationships and leadership succession. Other findings of the survey (detailed in the larger report) suggest areas for improvement in school management, such as charging families what it costs to educate students according to high standards of academic quality. Thus, school leaders and boards are encouraged to use the survey data

presented in the larger report, as well as in this article, to engage in rich and collaborative discussions, centered around developing robust strategic planning in order to move toward and ensure healthy practices at their schools. [RIB](#)

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Cardus Education Survey (CES) and Well-Being

MARISA CASAGRANDE

Well-being outcomes are rarely at the forefront of educational policy discussions, though they should be. At this particular juncture in time, well-being—poor well-being, that is—is par for the course in the daily news and weighing heavily on the minds and hearts of parents across the nation. A recent study by the American Psychiatric Association found that in 2017 about 34% of students were being treated for some sort of mental health issue, compared to 19% of students in 2007 (Ketchen et al. 2018). In addition to this, more than 80% of top university executives say that mental health is more of a priority on campus than it was just three years ago, according to a recent report released by the American Council on Education (Chessman and Taylor 2019).

The Cardus Education Survey (CES) has become recognized as one of the most valuable and comprehensive surveys of independent school graduate outcomes. For nearly ten years now, the CES has advanced a holistic view of education by collecting a broad range of views from graduates of the independent Protestant school sector, the independent

Catholic school sector, the independent non-religious school sector, the home-schooling sector, and the public school sector. By collecting the views and perceptions of graduates between the ages of 23 and 40—a season of life when most have settled into particular life patterns and worldviews—in relation to a series of academic, spiritual, social, and well-being outcomes, CES data provides a comprehensive picture of general life patterns and norms influenced by their distinctive school experiences.

CES results have consistently pointed to Christian school graduates having a distinctive profile, particularly when it comes to their spiritual formation, as well as a number of relational and well-being outcomes. The most recent (2018) U.S. CES survey results have been published in a report entitled, *Rethinking Public Education—Including All Schools that Contribute to the Public Good* (Casagrande et al. 2019). The report, available at the Cardus website (cardus.ca/research/education/), places considerable emphasis on well-being outcomes while advancing an argument for public system reform to include greater support for, and inclusion

of, independent schools—not only because these schools offer important contributions to the common good, but also because they provide valuable spaces for child flourishing and well-being.

While CES results have consistently highlighted the positive influence of Christian schools on religious and spiritual formation, it is important to draw attention to the positive influence of this school sector on a number of well-being outcomes, in particular the distinctive outcomes of these graduates in terms of their high-school experiences and present well-being. The following findings illuminate significant connections between these areas, highlighting graduate perceptions of their high-school years and various dimensions of well-being.

School Culture Data

Many factors contribute to well-being, but certainly the educational environment figures prominently among these considerations. The CES data provides some important insight into how graduates from the various sectors look back on their high school experience. On these measures, Protestant school graduates are distinct in terms of how favorably they perceive these years. Consider the following:

- Protestant school graduates were in strongest agreement of all graduates that their teachers cared for them, with 40% of Protestant school graduates reporting they “completely agree” that their teachers cared, compared to only 15% of public-school graduates holding this view.
- Protestant school graduates regarded the quality of their relationships with other students more positively than students from other sectors. They reported strong agreement that “their high school was close-knit.” Sixty percent of protestant school graduates reported having a close-knit high school experience compared to 33.4% of public school graduates.

Religious Formation and Well-being

The positive spiritual and religious influence of Christian schooling on its graduates has been well documented and consistently demonstrated across three waves of CES survey data (2011, 2014, and 2018). Protestant school graduates report that their spirituality brings a feeling of fulfillment and are most likely to report experiencing deep communion with God and deep peace in the midst of life’s problems. They are also most likely to believe that they have a moral obligation to practice spiritual disciplines and spend more time in prayer or reading religious literature than other school sector graduates.

Importantly, these graduates are also distinct in a number of well-being outcomes. The following themes and data points are worth noting:

- Protestant Evangelical school graduates express the

highest levels of gratitude and purpose in the survey and are least likely to feel that they lack direction in life.

- Protestant school graduates are also the least likely to feel helpless in dealing with life’s problems; almost half of these graduates disagree that they feel helpless in dealing with life’s problems, compared to 37% of public-school graduates.
- Indeed, 63% of Protestant Evangelical school graduates completely agree that they have much to be thankful for, while only 54% percent of public-school graduates completely agree with this view.
- Interestingly, Protestant school graduates also seem to watch the least amount of TV among the school sectors included in our data. The inverse relationship between social media/screen time and well-being is increasingly recognized through emerging research.

Social Ties and Relationships

As Western society is increasingly marked by loneliness and social isolation, researchers and policy makers turn their attention to understanding the root causes of these dynamics. A recent Cardus survey conducted in partnership with the Angus Reid Institute (2019) illuminates some important aspects of loneliness in our society. In taking stock of these outcomes, Ray Pennings, Co-founder and Executive Vice President of Cardus notes, “two key social institutions seem to provide a buffer against isolation and loneliness—family and faith.” Our relationships help us to find meaning and love. On these measures, Christian school graduates seem to be faring most positively compared with graduates from other school sectors. Consider the data:

- Protestant school graduates have among the highest number of close ties to others in whom they can confide, including family members. A number of measures point to these graduates as very family oriented and holding the most traditional views on marriage. Indeed, a 2017 Cardus report concludes that Protestant school graduates are most likely to stay married (Schwarz and Sikkink 2017).
- Protestant school graduates are the least politically engaged but they report having the highest percentage of volunteer hours of all of the school sectors in our survey.

Taking all this together, there is no question that Protestant school graduates experience a more nurturing environment during their high school years than most and that many of these graduates go on to have strong and healthy relationships with friends and family in their young adult years. While these graduates are more likely to experience a deep communion with God and hold traditional and family-oriented worldviews, they also seem to balance family and communal obligations and dedicate high levels of volunteer hours in comparison with other graduates. They are embedded in communities that help give meaning and shape

to their lives. Moreover, these communities serve to mitigate against the tide of individualism and lack of purpose that many others in society may feel.

Nearly ten years of Cardus Education Survey data makes clear that Christian schools form important middle and mediating layers of society. These formative school communities cultivate strong faith, deep relationships, and a spirit of generosity. However, the well-being outcomes of these graduates are just as distinctive—and increasingly significant to society. CES data demonstrates that independent Protestant schools provide important conditions for child flourishing and well-being. The close-knit nature and compassionate culture of this school sector is widely acknowledged and appreciated by these graduates, who also tend to report having a higher number of close relationships, as well as a higher sense of gratitude and purpose. Graduates' relationships are deeply connected with their overall sense of wellbeing. By providing spaces of belonging, compassion, and meaning, Christian schools play an important role at a time when many are searching for these “spaces of grace.” **RIB**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Deeply interested in community-based policy approaches to human flourishing and wellbeing, Marisa Casagrande's background includes over 15 years of research and analysis in this area, with some occasional forays into the teaching of young minds. Marisa now works as a senior researcher at Cardus, focusing mainly on education and family policy. Marisa is also a mother, wife, teacher, and choir director, and lives in Ottawa Ontario.

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Insights from Doctoral Research

School Size and Students' Sense of Belonging: Is There a Difference?

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In his influential work with children, Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) noted the essential nature of relationships to healthy child development. In his study of students in Christian schools, Marrah (2009) brought attention to the importance of healthy relationships to spiritual formation. When viewed alongside Baumeister and Leary's (1995) “belongingness hypothesis,” which identifies the “*need to belong*” as a “fundamental human need” met only in the context of lasting, caring relationships (497), the benefit of a school culture that fosters healthy relationships takes on greater significance.

The level of importance increases when considering the adverse affects of not meeting a child's sense of belonging. For adolescents, lack of belonging often manifests itself as depression, anxiety, early sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, and teen suicide. Because Christian schools anchor their mission and education in the relational foundation inherent to the person of Jesus Christ, they are uniquely positioned

to cultivate the sense of belonging in their students, which is essential to healthy psychological and spiritual development.

Research Purpose and Method

Few studies have explored those factors within the Christian school community setting in the United States that foster a sense of belonging in students. The primary purpose of this study was to discover the importance, if any, that school size has in a Christian high school student's perceived sense of school belonging. Building on the significance of relationships to spiritual formation and community as the context for relationships, another purpose of this research was to examine the value students placed on their (1) relationships with teachers, (2) relationships with peers, and (3) extracurricular participation, as related to their sense of belonging to their schools.

The study was limited to K-12 member schools of the

Association of Christian Schools International or ACSI (N = 1385) and Christian Schools International or CSI (N = 105). Students in 11th and 12th grade (N=736) representing five different enrollment groups participated by taking the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM), which is a self-report instrument that measures students' perceived sense of school belonging. Enrollment groups were designated as follows: 1-100 students; 101-250 students; 251-500 students; 501-1000 students; and 1001-2000 students. The PSSM scale includes 18 multiple choice questions that are weighted using a Likert scale. A one-way ANOVA was conducted using the PSSM scores and student enrollment groups.

In addition, determining the perceived level of importance students placed on their school relationships and extracurricular participation required a qualitative measure of students' perceptions. Six additional questions were added to the survey asking students to rate and explain the level of value they placed on their teacher and peer relationships and extracurricular participation. Word frequency analyses were conducted on the qualitative responses elicited by the six additional questions.

Findings

PSSM score comparisons across enrollment groups did not reveal a connection between students' perceptions and school size. High PSSM mean scores for all the enrollment groups represented by the study, however, suggested the benefit of a closer examination of the characteristics of Christian schools that foster students' sense of belonging. Answers to the qualitative questions highlighted the significance students place on their peer and teacher relationships in shaping their sense of school belonging.

Discussion

The data analysis for this study revealed two major findings and two areas of interest for further exploration. The first major finding was that there was no statistically significant difference linking school size to students' perceived sense of belonging in the population of schools and students linked to this study. A second major finding revealed by the data was that the cultures of Christian high schools foster a high sense of belonging in students irrespective of size, as the mean scores of participating students in all groups reflected a high sense of school belonging. Word frequency analyses of qualitative data showed that the words most frequently used when referring to teachers were *relationship*, *friend*, and *close*. The word most frequently used when referring to peers was *friend*.

One finding of interest surfacing from this study was students' failure to mention spiritual ideals when explaining the importance of their teacher and peer relationships or extracurricular participation in their Christian schools. When describing the importance that relationships with their peers and teachers have on their sense of belonging,



students mentioned the words *spiritual growth*, *godly*, or *Christian* only nine times in the data. Students made note of how caring, supportive relationships connected them and to their teachers, but not to God. While students used terms indicating they received emotional support from their teachers 320 times, they only cited *prayer* three times, *God* or *godly* twice, and *spiritual* twice. Additionally, when describing their peer relationships, students used the word *friend* 179 times, but only one student stated that a friend helped him or her to be a better Christian.

The second area of interest was students' failure to connect school activities with Christian service or spiritual growth. Students' comments denote that they view extracurricular participation as a means for securing or maintaining friendships, an expression of school support or pride, or as an advantage in college acceptance. This supports Marrah's (2009) earlier finding, that students view extracurricular participation as neutral in spiritual formation.

While Christian school leaders can celebrate the knowledge that Christian school cultures cultivate a strong sense of belonging in students, further exploration is needed to understand if or how students connect their sense of belonging to faith in the person of Jesus Christ. It may be that a more intentional connecting of the two may offer a firmer foundation for healthy psychological and spiritual development. [RIB](#)

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Cultivating Teacher Growth Mindset

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Fixed and growth mindset are the names given to a continuum of beliefs people hold about the nature of intelligence and whether or not it is substantially changeable (Yeager and Dweck 2012). If people hold a growth mindset perspective, they believe that intelligence and ability are qualities that are changeable; through hard work, feedback, and using different strategies, people can actually become “smarter.” If people hold a more fixed mindset perspective, they believe that intelligence and ability are static—people are either “born with it” or not, and there is not much that can be done to change that.

For the past 30 years, a wealth of research has focused on understanding the impact of growth versus fixed mindset on student achievement and developing interventions to help children develop a growth mindset about their abilities and intelligence. How a person views and thinks about their intelligence or ability influences their goals, motivations, behaviors, outcomes, persistence in the face of obstacles, and willingness to invest in others through mentoring, feedback, or coaching (Haimovitz and Dweck 2016; Sevincer, Kluge, and Oettingen 2014). There is also research about the importance of teacher mindsets and beliefs and the impact those beliefs have on student learning outcomes (Rattan, Good and Dweck 2015). However, there is a lack of research on how teachers, as adults, can transform their own mindsets about student intelligence.

Scripture gives believers a mandate to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (Romans 12:2). For instructional leaders in a Christian school, understanding how the process of mindset transformation occurs within the adult population will help inform the structure of professional development and the coaching process of teachers and staff within the school. Transformed teachers transform classrooms, students, and learning, and serve as models for that process with their students.

Research Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to produce a theoretical model that explained the process that teachers experienced in the transformation of their mindset regarding student intelligence from fixed towards growth. This grounded theory study also explored effective transformation approaches, as well as obstacles to the transformation process.

Data collection and analysis took place in the Fall of 2017. A pre-screening survey that included both Dweck’s Mindset Instrument (2000) and the Learning Activities Survey (King 2009) was used to identify participants who had

experienced both a shift in mindset, and now held a growth mindset orientation. This study included the transformation experiences of 14 high school teachers (grades 9-12) from Northern Illinois representing six schools. Three of the teachers were from private faith-based schools and 11 teachers were from public schools.

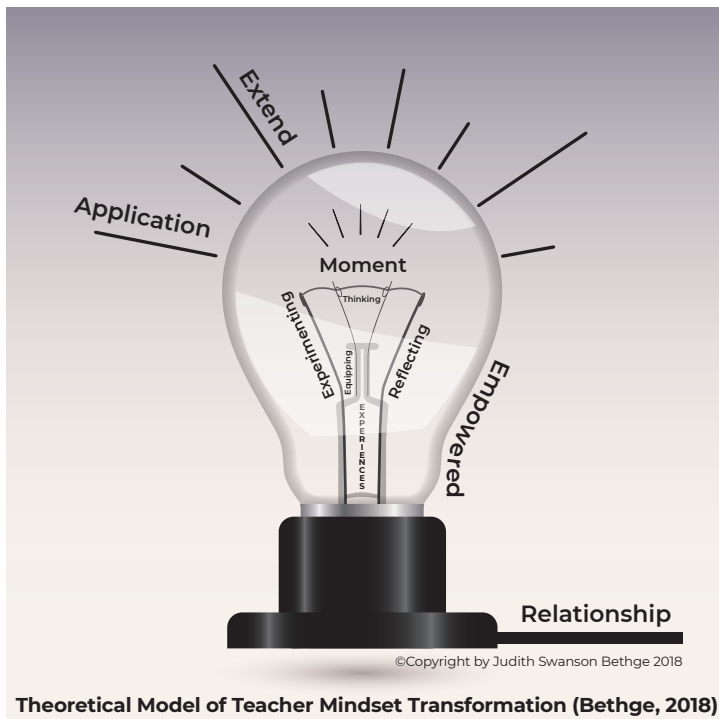
In addition to the pre-screening survey, data collection included: (1) a semi-structured interview; (2) a photographic metaphor activity designed by the researcher, where participants viewed a series of five images and selected and described which best represented their process of mindset transformation; (3) participant-identified artifacts in the classroom that represented their changed mindset; and (4) participant-generated recommendations for professional development that would have been helpful on their journey of mindset transformation. Data analysis included the development of a coding paradigm, which identified transformation as both a change process and a change in substance. The core category that emerged identified *relationship* as the current that energizes the process of transformation.

Findings

The central question of how teacher mindset about student intelligence transforms was answered by the model that emerged during the analysis, which is depicted in the visual model below. The model depicts transformation as represented in the form and function of an incandescent lightbulb.

The visual use of a lightbulb model that emerged from the study encapsulates both the process and the substance of transformed thinking. The model was heavily influenced by the interview question regarding process of change and then compared with the King (2009) Learning Activities Survey from the initial screening with a vertical analysis within each participant’s complete interview to confirm that the model holds true within each participant.

As depicted in this model, the teacher mindset transformation process is ignited by a **moment of realization or insight** that disturbs the status quo of the teacher’s thinking about intelligence. Instigated by a conversation, something read, or an unsettling situation, this flicker of insight launches the teacher’s mindset transformation journey. Teacher beliefs about the changeability of intelligence transform through a process of experiences that validate or challenge the teacher’s mindset.



Externally focused **experiments** of trying out new ideas or approaches in the classroom and internal **reflection** on the meaning of these experiments continue to refine a teacher's understanding of the concept of intelligence. The experiences of experimenting and reflecting were supported by **equipping activities** in which teachers engaged, such as exposure to ideas through reading, journal articles, professional development, and mentoring opportunities with colleagues.

Finally, teachers described a feeling of **empowerment** in how they began to own this change in their thinking about intelligence and became confident in their new approach. The power flowing through the whole transformation process is the core category of **relationship**. The transformation process also produces a substantive change in the teacher with the application of transformed thinking in the classroom through different instructional approaches, pedagogy, and organization of learning. Mindset transformation even extended beyond the immediate context of the classroom into other areas of the teacher's life and practice.

In addition to the model depicting the process of transformation, the study's sub-questions yielded insights into the qualities, influencing factors, and outcomes of this transformation. In terms of qualities, teacher participants described the transformation process as an ongoing and challenging journey where participants encountered difficulties but overcame the challenges using specific strategies. Teachers described their positive outlook in the midst of the changing and a clear future with more possibility. Finally, teachers described how the change happened within community and in relationship with others.

Factors that influenced the process of mindset transformation

included experiences with students who surprised teachers by their abilities, despite teacher pre-conceptions or students who learned differently from the teacher. Teachers described the disequilibrium between their beliefs and experiences that gave them an opportunity to try or see something differently. Relationships provided emotional support in the change process as dialogue and conversation helped refine and challenge thinking. Finally, teachers identified the impact of a learning-oriented mind open to new things and a belief of hope in something more to understand.

Teachers also shared the outcomes of mindset transformation and the role of professional development in the process. In their classrooms, teachers described becoming much more relationally focused with students, using different teaching strategies to reach all students, and increasing their learning expectations. Participants became reflective in their practice by listening more, embracing an attitude of humility, and modeling growth in their own lives with students.

Discussion

For Christian school educators, this study supports the importance of relationships in the process of mindset transformation. Teachers transformed their mindsets within the context of meaningful relationships with peers, students, and their administrators. Further research is needed into how the school administrator's mindset orientation towards intelligence impacts leadership behaviors and foster a growth-mindset focused culture within the building. This includes the evaluation of professional development programs and staff development in fostering teacher growth mindset. Creating an environment for teachers where they can experience the spark of transformation may help light a fire—that not only changes the immediate context of the classroom experience, but also positively impacts student learning. [RiB](#)

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Sustainability in Christian Education: Future-Facing Financial Models

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The 2019 Global Christian School Leadership Summit (GCSLS) drew over 1100 Christian education leaders from North America and across the world. Attendees were asked in the post event survey, "What do you think is the number one priority that Christian schools need to tackle right away?" Their top response was *enrollment and sustainability*.

This finding is far from surprising. Market challenges to the Christian school sector have been felt and well-documented in recent years, such as the changing faith profile of parents, in which the number of self-identified Christians is shrinking, and the proliferation of school options like public charter schools and online academies (Barna and ACSI 2017). These trends are occurring against a much larger backdrop of societal transformation. For example, a confluence of changes—such as rapid technological innovation, shifts in family structure, growing secularism, and increasing learning needs of students—have impacted schools of all types.

In *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Unchartered Territory*, Tod Bolsinger (2015) recounts the journey of Lewis and Clark through the Louisiana Purchase in these terms: "[They] were about to go off the map and into unchartered territory... What lay before them was nothing like what was behind them. There were no experts, no maps, no 'best practices' and no sure guides who could lead them safely and successfully" (27). Bolsinger makes the case that most challenges facing today's organizations are similar, because they are "adaptive" in nature—meaning they "go beyond the technical solutions of resident experts or best practices, or even the organization's current knowledge. They arise when the world around us has changed but we continue to live on the successes of the past" (19).

Similarly, the world in which the majority of Christian schools were founded—in the second half of the 20th century—no longer exists. The models on which Christian schools were built (tuition-driven, loyalty-based, brick-and-mortar) are often no longer suited to the market, cultural, and societal realities of today. But what is needed is far from a quick



fix—more than tweaking a practice or process here or there. Paradoxically, for Christian education to be sustained into the future, the way Christian education looks and functions—the underlying models by which schools operate—must change. **Sustainability is not finding a way to continue current practices into the future, as much as we might wish it. Rather, sustainability means ensuring the school's mission continues into the future, which likely will require that schools look very different from the past or today.**

ACSI has received grant funding to begin a new multiyear research project to identify and share data on promising financial models for Christian education. These adaptive financial models include things like new delivery systems enabled by technology, mergers and acquisitions, cost and resource sharing, entrepreneurship, boutique programs, school choice, wrap-around programs, church and community partnerships, and charter networks. There is much to learn from visiting and studying schools that are developing these models, including the process of transitioning to these models from a more traditional one. This is because schools will need as much imagination to figure out how to "get off the map" as they will to envision where they'll go once off it. Thus it is essential to understand from outliers not just the *what*, but also the *how*, of developing and launching future-facing models.

ACSI's project will utilize proven case study protocols to study these outliers and will also host dialogues, engage external expertise, facilitate networking, sponsor experimentation, and disseminate findings. This research project is designed to be successful catalyst for change that would not only increase the number of schools developing such models, but also connect them together so that insights, learning, and encouragement can be shared among them—with the goal of catalyzing the growth of sustainable financial models for Christian education. **RIB**

Questions about this upcoming project? Email research@acsi.org.

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as desire it. This commitment requires removing barriers to access for those who traditionally have not benefited from Christian school, as well as seeking out new ways to create access points. School Sustainability Research, Parent-School Choice (ACEF), and ACSI's A.C.E. Program are initiatives within this pillar.

Regarding the *Advocacy* pillar, because of the size of ACSI's membership, ACSI is by default viewed as the spokesperson for Christian schooling in the public square. In order to discharge this responsibility with excellence and seasoned speech (Colossians 4:6), and to equip our member schools to do the same, ACSI must invest in developing public-facing resources and forming strategic relationships with those working in the area of advocacy for Christian education and for religious liberty. This includes telling the story of ACSI schools in order to advocate for Christian education, expanding ACSI's Legal and Legislative Services, expanding parent-school choice (ACEF), and growing strategic affiliations around the world.

Inspired Leadership

Concurrent with the development of three pillars, ACSI sought a new chief executive who could provide vision and strong leadership to finalize and implement the strategic plan. In July 2019 this was accomplished, with the hiring of Dr. Larry Taylor, head of school at Prestonwood Christian School in Plano, Texas and a member of the ACSI Board of Trustees as well as the ACSI Education Foundation. As ACSI President, Dr. Taylor—who brings years of executive leadership and firsthand knowledge of the development of ACSI's three pillars—has hosted a number of Vision Tours in Fall 2019 and Spring 2020, with the goal of connecting with school leaders in their local context.

With ongoing feedback from these school leaders, ACSI will be finalizing the plan in Summer 2020. You are invited to keep up to date on strategic plan developments by visiting <https://community.acsi.org/3pillars/home>. **RIB**



ADVANCING, ACCESS, ADVOCACY: ACSI Looks to the Future

In the midst of significant challenge and change facing Christian education, how will ACSI achieve its mission—to strengthen Christian schools and equip Christian educators—both now and into the future?

In 2017, the ACSI Board of Trustees and staff began strategic planning around this question. Through a collaborative process that involved extensive input from school leaders and drew upon comprehensive needs assessment data, three “pillars” were identified for delivering ACSI’s mission into the future:

Advancing—Leading Christ-centered education towards excellence and flourishing

Access—Making Christ-centered education available and obtainable

Advocacy—Promoting and protecting Christ-centered education for today and tomorrow

These three pillars serve to clarify and focus ACSI’s initiatives and services into the future. Most importantly, they are responsive to member schools’ needs, and aim to meet those needs in ways that ACSI uniquely can—as the largest evangelical Christian school association in both the United

States and the world, with 2400 member schools in the United States, another 5500 member schools internationally, and a total of 25,000 affiliated schools across the globe, for a reach of 5.5 million children worldwide.

The Three Pillars

The *Advancing* pillar reflects ACSI’s desire for all schools to aspire to, achieve, and remain committed to a biblically-based philosophy of education, standards that are measurable, and flourishing-related criteria. ACSI strives to lead, support, and serve Christian schools, and educators, by placing them on a path of growth and flourishing using ACSI’s research-based Flourishing Schools Initiative. Major initiatives related to this pillar are Thought Leadership, Professional Development for Leaders, and Accreditation and Affiliated Services.

In regard to the *Access* pillar, ACSI is committed to making Kingdom education available to as many children and families



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