

Enrollment Decline in Urban New York Seventh-day Adventist Schools—Solutions?

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An Introduction

Enrollment appears to be a major recurring and annual theme in faith-based urban schools where faith communities are the salvation of a steady stream of minorities who depend on schools, to meet their educational and spiritual needs. These schools are an outgrowth of a network of faith denominations that are characterized by vertical immigrant communities transported almost wholesale from their countries of origin and existing in socio-cultural enclaves in a new homeland.

This paper identifies the problem, reviews relevant literature and then cites New York city as an example of enrollment urban decline. Solutions center on present efforts to remedy the situation.. No similar studies have been published, and while there is no ground for inference, this study suggests that it would be advantageous to conduct further research in urban centers.

The Problem

Seventh-day Adventist K-8 enrollments in the United States continues to experience decline despite strenuous efforts to the contrary. Is there any end in sight to the steady hemorrhaging? The decline is but a mirror image of enrollment decline in other faith-based school systems that cater to students in poverty-affected areas where jobs and income are of perilous importance. Whereas in 1960 there were near 12,000 faith-based urban schools in the

United States, by 2008 they were less than 6000, a decline of near 50%¹. The Report of The White House Domestic Policy Council report chronicles the decline in urban faith-based schools in several large cities, where the Seventh-day Adventist church traditionally has large populations. This decline is evident in Catholic, Lutheran and Adventist schools. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics, as cited in the White House Domestic Policy Council Report of 2008 show a “13 percent closure for Lutheran schools, 28 percent for Baptist schools, and 39 percent for Seventh-day Adventist schools” between 2000 and 2006.² Faith -based urban enrollment has been falling and the Seventh-day Adventist church school enrollment in K-12 urban areas is no different. Between 2000 and 2006, 71 urban Seventh-day Adventist schools closed with the loss of 3898 students.³ Surely, these steady closures represent an education investment loss; while membership grows at one end, schools experience a decline at the other, and at a time while education is touted as a strong plank of member socialization into the church’s tenets and socio-cultural practices.

A Summary Review of the Literature

A review of literature covering fifteen years of research on enrollment decline in Adventist K-12 schools⁴ showed a 20 percent enrolment decrease in K-8 schools between 1980

1. “White House Domestic Policy Council”, *Preserving a Critical National Asset—America’s Disadvantaged Students and the Crisis in Faith-based Urban Schools*, 2008.

2. White House Domestic Policy Council, 2008.

3. Ibid, “Table 1, Cumulative Change in Numbers of Faith-Based Urban Schools and their Students Religion: 2000-06 in White House Domestic Policy”, 2008

⁴ Gus Gregorutti, “Factors Influencing Enrollment Decline in Adventist K-12 Schools: A review of the literature”, unpublished doctoral paper, Andrews University, 2007

and 2005 , down from 53,304 in 1980 to 42,710 in 2005. Gregorutti further cited and summarized the research findings of several contributors between 1969 and 2006⁵.

(Metcalf,Stephan , Kromann , Roesel, Rhoads, Fink, Araya , Hunt, Baker, Mainda , Booker and Bryson). A more recent study on the reasons for enrollment decline in K- 12 Adventist schools supports earlier assertions that finances, parental perceptions of quality, pastoral attitudes, and environmental factors such as teacher attitudes and location were major factors contributing to enrollment decline.⁶ The La Borde study added a new dimension—that of quality of facilities as a perceived factor in enrollment decline.

Surprisingly, a review of the literature unearthed no specific studies by Seventh-day researchers on faith-based urban decline in Seventh-day Adventist schools. Urban centers represent rapidly growing populations of immigrant minorities, and resurgent re-segregated communities. These urban populations form a large chunk of Seventh-day church membership where enrollment growth and tuition income are closely intertwined because faith-based schools depend on tuition as the major source of financial operations, and at a time of falling unemployment, and scarce resources, the strain to continue these schools becomes more evident. Lack of deliberate attention to this steady urban decline could have telling impact on American Adventist colleges and universities who depend on enrolment from areas of the country that are associated with urban enrollment decline. The current study is an initial attempt to highlight then arrest the problem in urban areas, belted by rapid transit systems, thickly populated areas,

5. Ibid

6. Irma C. La Borde, “Reasons Seventh-day Adventist parents gave for not sending their children to Seventh-day Adventist elementary and secondary schools. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Andrews University, 2007. *Proquest Dissertations and Theses*.

small-business commerce, undocumented parents, single parent families, ethnic restaurants and a high-paced city life. The proximity of schools in the borough of Brooklyn, started by individual churches (for example in the Northeastern Conference, one of the two Seventh-day Adventist church conferences in New York city, the six Brooklyn schools operated by the conference are less than 3 miles away from each other), is another feature of New York Adventist urban school sprawl--all compete for the same pool of students, amidst differing tuition rates, book fees, and extra-curricular offerings.

Parents are no longer persuaded by lengthy solicitations on church philosophy. They are apt to opt for what they perceive to be quality and a unique distinctiveness that adds value to the school. We found that parents were keenly interested in the education of their children and wanted to participate in the same. Even a faithful restatement of Isaiah 54:13 “and all thy children shall be taught of the Lord...” (KJV) appears to be unhelpful. Adventist customers have become more savvy and demanding, and are exercising a variety of choices. Philosophy and quality have become integrated into a mindset that peers through the lenses of comparable facilities , services and student performance.

The New York City Experience

The city of New York has four boroughs namely Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx and Manhattan. In these boroughs the Seventh-day Adventist church has ten schools serving large church populations. Both conferences have a combined population of over 70,000 members.⁷ Near ninety percent of the members live in urban New York, a metropolis of near 7 million.

7. Atlantic Union Conference Statistics, Department of the Secretariat, Atlantic Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Lancaster, Massachusetts, 2009.

Schools are located in areas that qualify for federal and state services. The churches and the schools in turn are populated by African-Americans and first and second generation immigrant students from the English-speaking Caribbean, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Immigration research reports show that the bulk of Caribbean immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean, Haiti and the Dominican Republic settle in the New York-New Jersey area⁸. These immigrant groups are represented in both Seventh-day Adventist conferences. Table 1 below describes enrollment decline in K-8 schools of the Northeastern and Greater New York Conferences over a five-year period, representing a twenty percent enrollment increase for one conference and an over twenty-four percent K-8 enrollment decrease for both conferences.⁹

Table 1
Summary of Enrollment for Greater New York
and Northeastern Conferences, 2005-2010

Year	04	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	Difference	%
NEC	2230	2286	2-36	1988	1841	1790	-440	20
K-8: NEC/GYNC	-0-	2744	2548	2429	2340	2100	-649	24

“Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show clearly that the crisis among faith-based urban schools continues to this day. Since the 1989–90 school years, 13 percent of central-

8. Mary Mederios Kent, “Immigration and America’s Black Population, *Population Bulletin*, 62, 4 (2007). <http://www.prb.org/pdf07/62.4immigration.pdf>.

9. Department of Education, Atlantic Union Conference Opening and Closing Reports, Lancaster, Massachusetts, 2005-2009,

city Lutheran schools have closed, 28 percent of central-city Baptist schools have closed, and 39 percent of central-city Seventh-Day Adventist schools have closed”¹⁰

Causes of the Problem

“Faith-based urban schools are closing because of a chronic lack of resources. Faced by perpetual budget deficits, with no clear, sustainable source of income to close the gaps, schools are often left with no alternatives apart from shutting their doors”¹¹ Despite heavy subsidies, faith-based schools are still under economic pressure. We found that in the Seventh-day Adventist schools, enrollment decline was rooted in lack of services at schools such as social and psychological services, school meals, and technology. . While the schools promoted Christian education, buildings and facilities had either fallen into disrepair, or had no gyms, and other services such as exceptional child services, social-work and counseling systems and other relevant support systems. While these services existed in some schools, there was no coordinated systemic approach for service offerings.. There was no uniformity of financial aid across conferences but both conferences heavily subsidized salaries. Parents desired to send their children to Adventist schools, but could not afford to do so and reluctantly place them in public schools. In addition, the advent of the 9-11 terrorist attacks in New York and subsequent security concerns, appeared to have dampened some of the enthusiasm for traveling longer distances as parents desired to keep their children as near to their homes as possible. The schools

10. White House Domestic Policy Council, p. 207. 2008.
http://www.floridaschoolchoicefund.org/pdfs/08_White_House_report_inner_city_faith_based_schools.pdf

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10, 2008.

had no central or coordinated marketing system, such efforts depending mostly on the efforts of individual principals.

A Conceptual Framework

A theoretical base for practice has been the linking a value-added product and distinctive spiritual emphasis to the quest for quality in student performance and services. Beardsley challenges Adventist schools to create added value¹². The methodology of value creation is based on the premise that if the product meets the high demands of the Adventist consumer, then there will be a positive response once the product distinctiveness is linked with financial aid, and necessary services to students. The Adventist consumer is not merely looking for product value in a narrowly defined sense but value in both the spiritual and practical immersed in a wide range of resources and services. We utilized three major theories as a basis for solutions.

The first theory we termed the six P's marketing mix is a modification of traditional marketing mix theory¹³ (a consideration of product, price, place, philosophy, promotion and people). The product needs to integrate each of those aspects in order to be revitalized. Each of those facets must be in some type of balance. A well-defined product at the wrong price will result in decline, and a great price and product without reference to the needs of the people (both students and parents will produce the same decline). A product without and/or with a distinctive philosophy in poor facilities is still likely to result in enrollment decline. Schools were encouraged to make full use of the resources provided under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

12. Lisa Beardsley, "Adventist Education must create value, *Adventist News Network*, September 2, 2010.

13. Philip Kotler, Karen A. Fox, *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions*, 2nd edition, Barnes and Noble, 1995

The second theory we used was an adaptation of Porter's Five Forces Competitive Model which lists entry of competitors, threat of substitutes, bargaining power of buyers and suppliers, rivalry and government regulations as elements of a competitive model.¹⁴ Our conclusion was to recommend that schools be differentiated along either structure or product, especially where they were in close proximity. Thus, rather than having several K-8 schools compete with each other, we differentiated them into K-5 schools, K-8 schools, one bi-lingual school all supportive of a 6-12 school as a campus of the traditional day academy. Schools were divided into geographical districts and counseling and social work resources assigned to districts. A tight-knit inter-school transport system has been initiated¹⁵.

A third approach was to adapt Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological and socio-cultural approach which defines the multi-environment of the child to drive the organizational structure.¹⁶ That was accomplished by redrawing the organizational chart to establish an education department from the perspective of a child's environment and to structure academics, pupil personnel services (social work and counseling services), spiritual formation, fund-raising and grants-entitlement. We concluded that simply enhancing a product without a structural reorganization would be useless since the product would have no vehicular transport.. The structural reorganization included a P-12 pipeline—linking all schools with a Seventh-day Adventist university or college.

14. Michael E. Porter, *Competitive Strategy—Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. New York: Free Press, 1980.

15. Ibid, *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*, New York: Free Press, 1985

16. Dede Paquet, John Ryan, 2001. "Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, 2001.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_Systems_Theory#References

Solutions

Hopefully, the theoretical approaches that we recommend can be implemented in other cities with some adaptation. Our suggestions are simple—enhance the product mix, identify a competitive advantage, and deliver a transport mode into which the strategy of product mix and competition can be the drivers. A posture that includes financial restructuring will lead to an overall strategic approach for the K-8 schools. In summary then, we have the following:

1. **Product Mix**—Develop marketing mixes that enhances the product by integrating the six P's of people, promotion, product, philosophy, price, and place and keeping them in balance with each other. The product involves taking advantage of all the services offered by the government in all areas such as books, transportation, instructional support under all the entitlements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Titles 1-IX.¹⁷
2. **Competitive Advantage**—Differentiate the product so that a school competes only with itself—each school must have a competitive advantage, something it does really very well to the exclusion of all others
3. **Structure**—Align the organizational structure to match the socio-cultural needs of the students so that the structure becomes functional and flexible
4. **Finances**--Where the system is financially, misaligned, balance all budgets by bringing costs and expenses in line initially before re-growing the system
5. **Strategic Plan**--Combine all of the above into a strategic plan

17. Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965. <http://www.k12.wa.us/esea/>

Might this not be a time for Adventist renewal and re-commitment? In “Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005), the Catholic bishops reaffirmed their strong conviction “that Catholic elementary and secondary schools are of great value to our Church and our nation and...in our role as teachers we are each responsible for the total educational ministry”.¹⁸ Hopefully, a similar affirmation will flow from this nationwide summit on change in Adventist education at La Sierra University this fall.

¹⁸ “Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium”. *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc.* 2005.

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http://www.floridaschoolchoicefund.org/pdfs/08_White_House_report_inner_city_faith_based_schools.pdf.

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