

# **Crossroads of Peril and Promise**

**A National Summit on Adventist Education**

**Reflection on Seventh-day Adventist Education  
In the Pennsylvania Conference**

**By**

**David Morgan**

**Vice President of Education**

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I've been an educator since 1988. My entire career has been spent in the Pennsylvania Conference. During that time I've served in a one room school for four years, a two room school for five years, a Jr. Academy with 10 plus staff for eight years, vice principal and recruiter for our academy for two years, and Vice President of Education for the past three years. During these twenty-three years I have had ample time to learn from my many mistakes, victories, and experiences.

The comments I'd like to share with you are somewhat narrow as I am giving you a perspective from my time in Pennsylvania. If there are themes or principles that match experiences and perspectives of others, then perhaps my words will add some value to the dialogue. However, I don't suppose that my comments are in general to the NAD, I only offer them as my opinion.

As I have studied this problem of enrollment, I have concluded that we have done a poor job equipping our school boards, principals, and teachers with the tools and training that they need to fill the role of both educator and recruiter. The stakeholders that we need to target are parents, students, school board, church community, and the public community at large. What follows is a summation of my perspective.

As I have seen and studied the dynamics at play in Pennsylvania, I see several areas that we must address. We have not kept up with current research in how students learn and in turn, how we should teach. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory suggests that there are more than eight types of intelligences, yet we as teachers in Pennsylvania (this is a generalized statement, some of our teachers are very cutting edge) have settled into a teaching style that we have used for the past 15-20 years (avg. age of our teachers is 47). Ellen White shares in

Education (White 1903) “Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator-- individuality, power to think and to do.”

We have had a philosophy that is cutting edge. Zhao (Zhao 2009) has studied education in both China and the United States. He comments:

To be creative is to be different. Creative people often have ideas, behaviors, beliefs, and lifestyles that deviate from the norm and tradition. How these people and their idea are treated by others has a defining effect on creativity and indeed on different social groups-- that is, a collection of individuals, be it families, schools, communities, or a whole country...creativity cannot be taught, but it can be stifled...the creativity gap between Americans and Chinese exists not because American schools teach creativity more or better than their Chinese counterparts. They just do not thwart creativity as much as the Chinese.

The impact of this quote alone is a slap in the face. For one, because I believe this is true. We are using 1950's technology (generalized observation of mine) to the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. Many teachers still use the “stand and deliver” method of instruction. This flies in the face of one of our undergirding of Adventist education, that each child (White 1903) is created unique in the image of the creator and that each child is to be taught to be a thinker, not a mere reflector of man's thoughts. If the effects of gaining total control over a student has resulted in a country with students struggling under enormous stress and pressure, and that country's approach to education is suffocating their very future, then what will happen to our future if we to continue to stifle the creative learning of our students

Parents are looking for a program that is safe, meets the unique needs of their child, and provides a Christian foundation. Unless we begin to push professional growth from the NAD on down, parents will continue to buy into the notion (despite the Cognitive Genesis evidence) that our schools are not quality. When a board member (also a parent) asks the Head teacher to explain how learning happens in a one room school, and the teacher can't articulate what she

does, there are problems. The actual product and how it is delivered needs to be reviewed. Too many classrooms struggle with a singular approach to teaching, suggesting that “one size fits all”. This is particularly true in our secondary grades. Again, this approach to teaching (Sage on the Stage) fails to line up with our Adventist philosophy of training our students to be thinkers rather than mere reflectors. If Howard Gardner’s theory is correct (Baum, Viens, Slaten 2005) it is imperative that our educators examine how their students learn, and make the necessary corrections to their delivery.

The current church community is less interested in the academic program of our schools; rather, they want to know that the spiritual program is strong, robust, and distinctly Adventist. Shane Anderson (Anderson 2008) offers that “The number one reason for the decline in Adventist education has to do with our division-wide lack of a sense of our unique Adventist selves. We have too often lost our taste for living in uniquely Adventist ways, and we thus are murky on our Adventist identity.”

I don’t subscribe to this theory alone, but do agree that there is an element of truth to the eroded support of our schools because we have failed to define how decidedly Christian (Adventist) we truly are. George Knight (Knight 2008) offers that if SDA schools are not offering distinctly Adventist Education then:

“If Seventh-day Adventist institutions are Christian only in the sense that they have Jesus and the evangelical gospel, then any good evangelical school will do. And with that one stroke we have removed any compelling reason for Seventh-day Adventist schools to exist.”

Another area that my schools are suffering is the failure to create community. This is really the key focal point; community amongst parents, board members, staff, students, constituents, and the community at large. People today want to be part of something, to feel like

the community they are part of is making a difference in their world. Seth Godin (Godin 2008) writes in his book *Tribes* that organizations that refuse to acknowledge the need to change find themselves in the middle of a society that is global in its reach and a market place that desperately desires “remarkable” and all we offer is a system following archaic rules, schools (and educators) that resist change and growth because we are doing things the way we always have, safe, comfortable, and far from our philosophy of how we should be training our students. In my opinion it is time to kick “safe” to the curb!

This need to break with a twenty to thirty year old approach to education is true across the spectrum of stake holders. Students don’t care about the 3 R’s, they care about friends, relationships, and social connections with their peers and teachers. Their parents care about the academics and extracurricular activities that help round their child with a quality education. Constituents want to know that traditional Adventist values and standards are being taught. They want to know that there is a clear difference between their church school and the local public school. The local community seldom knows we even exist, so it’s hard for them to define what they “want” from our schools.

Our schools struggle to provide such community, and in some cases flat out fail to see it as their job to do so. Many of our schools operate under the old paradigm that said if you’re a good Adventist you will send your child to our school. And so we wait, complain, and accuse parents of not caring, the pastor not doing enough, while all along failing to realize the importance of the school tackling this need to build community.

Part of this process of building community begins with understanding how to properly communicate. Our small school settings create environments that can become very contentious. It takes skill to navigate the waters of communication with parents, school boards, and

constituents. There has been a failure to engage these key individuals by the Head teacher/ Principal in meaningful collaborative relationships built on clear communication that speaks to issues rather than each other.

Susan and Peter Glasser suggest (Glasser 2007) that our impact, influence, and ultimately our legacy are defined by how we communicate through a universe of potentially deadlocked moments. Even with the best of intentions, many of us react automatically and emotionally, making communication blunders that take a toll on our professional and personal lives. In order for educators to successfully navigate these dangerous waters, it is necessary that they receive training in “how” to communicate.

Peter Senge (Senge 1990) writes in *The Fifth Discipline*:

The discipline of team learning involves mastery the practices of dialogue and discussion, the two distinct ways that teams converse. In dialogue, there is free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, a deep “listening” to one another and suspending on one’s own views. By contrast, in discussion different views are presented and defended and there is a search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at this time. Dialogue and ability to distinguish between the two and to move consciously between them.

It is this skill of communication that will allow our educators to avoid the pitfall that comes when we look to “defend” our positions and really understand what the people we are trying to communicate are trying to tell us.

Another area that our educators are poorly trained in is that of casting vision. Andy Stanley (2007) states in his book “Making Vision Stick” that there are five things a leader must to do increase the likelihood of making their vision stick:

1. State the vision simply
2. Cast the vision convincingly
3. Repeat the vision regularly

4. Celebrate the vision systematically
5. Embrace the vision personally

It is hard to follow through on these steps if one doesn't know how to generate a direction you want the school to go.

It is my opinion that our teachers would benefit from specific areas of professional growth. These requirements would help strengthen teachers in areas that are weak such as communication skills, how to set vision and evaluate your success in moving toward that vision, and strategies for improving classroom instruction.

This suggests, in my opinion, that we don't have a marketing problem, we have a systems failure. This failure can be reversed by leaders that clearly know what Adventist education is, how to build a strong vision around that definition, and how to build community around that vision. Only then will we raise the likelihood of us providing impact education to our communities by being distinctly academic, and decidedly Christian.

I don't suppose to have all the answers to this complicated discussion, but I know that as one person, I have to do something. To that end, over the next year, I will be holding quarterly phone conferences with small groups of Conference educators. During those sessions we will be reviewing a different concept that has been shared within this reflection paper. By consistently raising the various issues to the attention of our teachers, we may in fact begin to change the ways in which we "do" education. This will in turn generate more "word of mouth" of a positive sense and grow our community. I will do a better job holding teachers accountable for growing professionally, behaving professionally, and setting high expectations for their students. I will continue to promote the positive aspects of Christian education in Pennsylvania, looking to refute those that want to claim that the value of an SDA education is insignificant. Together, we will do

all that we can to promote our schools to our parents, our constituents, and most importantly, to our community. It is time for us to rethink how we do “school” and allow ourselves the painful process of shifting our paradigm to a system that meets the needs of all of our stakeholders. This will continue to be our goal in Pennsylvania. To be distinctly academic; decidedly Christian.



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