

# Opening Our Doors

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Kelsey's eyes filled with tears and I knew something was wrong. "Mrs. O, I need to talk to you privately." she said. When I pulled her aside, Kelsey shared that her beloved grandmother had just been diagnosed with cancer, terminal cancer. Nearly every day in the following weeks we met at lunchtime and prayed together as she processed her grief. We shed tears, recognizing the fleeting nature of this life, but talking also of the hope of heaven and the comfort it brings in a time like this.

These moments are some of the most precious for teachers, especially Adventist teachers, with the freedom to share our faith and the blessed hope we hold with our students. On the Sabbath morning that her grandmother passed away, Kelsey had her mom drive her to church because she knew she could find me there.

What makes this story notable is that Kelsey wasn't from an Adventist family. Nor even from a Christian background. Kelsey comes from what we call the 'World' and I was honored to have a relationship with her.

**The call of this paper is to consider a vision for our schools which includes serving non-Adventist students in a very intentional way, offering God's love embedded in an irresistibly creative curriculum.**

This is a call to educate not just our own SDA children, but to consider "the Kelseys" in our communities.

## **Jesus Calls Us to be the Salt of the Earth**

The first reason we must consider the Kelseys stems from the words of Jesus calling us to be the salt of the earth. A tasty addition to almost everything we eat, salt goes on corn on the cob, tomatoes, bread and even in ice cream! Yet how often do we see someone sitting down to eat a whole bowlful of salt?

The reality is that salt is a flavor enhancer, being most effective when mixed into other foods. About 15 years ago, our school began to change our ideas about the recipe for a church school. We prayed God would open our doors to be a tasty, sought-after educational option in our community so that we could be His salt.

We adopted a motto, "Creative education that honors the Creator." In the years since, we have searched for the best practices that would enhance our value to students and their parents in our community. What followed became an exciting journey. We soon found that engaged students are enthusiastic students.

Only a week into last summer, I got a call from a first year non-Adventist school parent. “Clancy came to me and said that he found something about Columbine Christian School that he really doesn’t like and I wanted to share it with you.” I was curious to hear what she had to say. She continued. “He is disappointed that this summer doesn’t have the same appeal as other summers. He blames that on CCS. For the first time, he was sorry to see the school year end.” She was incredulous. “I can’t thank you enough for this year.” It seems parents of engaged students are enthusiastic supporters of Adventist education.

For some, the idea of opening the door to those outside of the faith raises a question. If we invite non-Adventist families into our schools how can we protect the safe God-centered environment that we offer? Maybe a few would be okay, but just not too many. Won’t too many non-Adventists negatively influence our students? Determined to act out of love, not fear, we’ve handled those concerns very deliberately.

Our school climate is cultivated by Godly teachers, determined to impact their students through authentic relationship. Curriculum and classroom culture are not subject to a majority vote by students. Instead, they are carefully crafted by teachers who are skilled and loving communicators. We clearly lay out expectations of respectful behavior, language and boundaries. Our culture provides a blessed respite from a world of increasing chaos. We find non-Adventist children are no different from their Adventist counterparts in participating in this culture. In fact, many of our students have only been in our school and this is the only culture they know and practice.

### **Solidifying Our Core Beliefs**

Adventist values have life-changing potential, but it’s possible forget their power when we’re surrounded by people who share our perspective almost entirely. When we put ourselves in a position to meet and minister in a diverse group of people, our core values are solidified.

Some of you are asking the question, “Does relationship and contact with non-Adventists somehow dilute our beliefs, making us less Adventist?” As you consider what that might look like for you, let us share our experience. Far from abandoning our faith, we find that sharing ourselves with others clarifies the meaning of the beliefs we hold.

For instance, many parents embrace a value of a healthy lifestyle, eating organic food and shopping at the health food store. They might not share the concept that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Still we have found common ground, opening a door.

In our community, parents often value nature as a precious resource and appreciate the focus we place on the natural world and outdoor education. As Adventists, all creation refers back to the Creator. So while the values connect to different motivations, again we find common ground.

In a fast-paced society, families are often intrigued with the concept of a day of rest. Within us lies a God-given desire for the Sabbath and more than one parent has sighed wistfully and said, “Wow. I wish I had a Sabbath.” A desire for rest is common ground for everyone.

Jesus called us to be in the world, but not of it. Our school community is comprised of atheists and evangelicals and all points between. We appreciate the chance to live in this environment, sharing the life-changing experience of Christianity with people of all persuasions. As we teach Bible, we seek to meet each student where they are.

Like Paul in Athens, we have an opportunity to speak into the culture, directing people toward the Creator behind the creation. As one father said to us, “I used to be a complete atheist. Now I describe God as The Impossible that IS.”

**The third reason for considering the Kelseys in your community is that it just might save your school.**

Saving schools is not a business decision. It is preserving our mission. We have dedicated individuals at every level of our educational system, with schools and a management structure in place across the country. However, while our colleges train young people as teachers, shrinking enrollments and closing schools undermine their dream. Dedicated teachers, intent on educating children, instead face discouraging problems they are not trained or equipped to address:

- How can I get the families from my church to commit to SDA education?
- How can I teach large grade spreads without burning out?
- What will I do for a job if this school closes?

In Durango, for example, counting only constituent students, our school would look like many others around the country. With a small church in a small town, we have less than twenty school-age SDA children, from Pre-school to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Given standard ratios, we might afford a teacher and an aide.

Instead, this year, our staff of six teachers was blessed to welcomed 98 students, approximately 80% of whom are non-Adventist.

We overflow with thanksgiving to the Great Recruiter for the miracle we see each day. Our pastor often tells us how grateful he is that the school does not depend on contributions from the church to fund operating expenses or salaries. Only capital projects receive direct financial assistance.

But more than just solid enrollment numbers, our mission is intact. Our teachers, connected with their passion, are doing the job they love – teaching students. High teacher satisfaction and one or two grades in a classroom leads to low turnover.

Larger enrollment also means a larger community with talents to share, adding interest for everyone involved. Accordingly, we offer computer labs, PE, and art as well as after-school juggling, rock climbing and mountain-biking clubs.

In reality, opening our school to non-Adventist students forced us to do many things that are good for the educational experience of all our students. With public schooling in Durango among the top in Colorado, we can't compete simply on academic achievement. Creative education is a requirement, not an option. Non-Adventist parents don't give us a pass because we're 'part of the church.' They are paying tuition and expect a quality experience. However, in a Divine symbiosis, their tuition dollars make it easier for us to provide that experience.

### **Principles in Action**

By now, some of you are willing to consider opening your doors to non-SDA students, and so the question becomes how do you draw more students to your school? We are anxious to share some of the principles that have guided our progress. But before we share these, we want to be clear that the application of these principles will look different in every school. We want to share what we believe any school could use to create a thriving educational experience that would attract students from across their whole community. Here's the heart of our study and work, in order of priority.

### **Care for the individual**

A child's education and development is at the center of a parent. As parents enter the front door, they long for teachers that understand, that "get" their child. In fact, parents long to be understood themselves. We begin with care for the individual because nothing more magnetically draws students and their families into your school.

Caring for students as individuals takes many forms. It means we want to know their learning styles, their gifts, their temperament, their fears and their hopes. We must know our students well enough to see past their liabilities and into their God-given potential.

Practically, this begins when a parent calls with an enrollment inquiry. Paperwork takes a backseat to authentic conversation. We invite parents to stop in for a personal tour, and we explain our mission and our spiritual focus in the best words we know, hoping to provide an attractive sense of who we are. We see these inquiries as God-directed events. We pray in each situation for a mutual fit, finding the best choice for all involved. In fifteen years of using this approach, we've never regretted the results.

If care for the individual brings families into our school, it is also the defining element that ensures they stay. Integrity demands consistency between our recruiting process and our teaching practice. Developing strength in this critical area requires a commitment to study

and a willingness to change as you learn. Entire books could be written on implementing this important principle in Adventist education, drawing from the works of Gardner, E.G. White, Zimmerman and Winebrenner, to name a few. Care for the individual emanates from our belief in a God who formed each person, knows us by name, and calls us as educators to seek out His fingerprints on each student.

## **Creative Methodologies**

Great teaching takes place when we teach with methods that are personal and authentic. Because Adventist schools are small, we have the opportunity to experiment with best practices and creative approaches. The educational landscape offers many exceptional methodologies that can be learned and applied in Adventist classrooms without reinventing the wheel.

At Columbine Christian School our pedagogical approach is strongly influenced by theories that include:

**Responsive Classroom** – “an approach to teaching and learning that fosters safe, challenging, and joyful classrooms and schools, kindergarten through eighth grade... it consists of practical strategies for bringing together social and academic learning throughout the school day.” (Origins)

**Expeditionary Learning** – an approach inspired by the Outward Bound model of outdoor education and based on “building a school-wide culture of trust, respect, responsibility and joy in achievement.” (Expeditionary Learning)

**Montessori Method** – a curriculum which depends on creating a physical classroom environment using hands-on didactic materials. This method encourages teachers “to respect individual differences, and to emphasize social interaction and the education of the whole personality rather than the teaching of a specific body of knowledge.” (International Montessori)

**Place-Based Learning** – “Immerses students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities and experiences; Uses these as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum; and emphasizes learning through participation in service projects for the local school and/or community.” (Promise of Place)

Of these approaches, we are currently immersed in Place-Based Learning. We find this method connects to our teachers’ passion, opening a channel that brings their best into the classroom. K-6<sup>th</sup> grades spend an afternoon weekly outside, combining science, primitive life skills, social studies, and occasionally a living history episode. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade class takes a number of overnight outdoor education trips. We map, we hike, we snowshoe, we examine invertebrate pond life, we pray, we track, we serve, we build team-work, self-

confidence, and so much more. At the heart of it all, we honor the Creator of this place and all that fills it.

## **Beauty**

"Nature herself has imprinted on the minds of all the idea of God." Cicero

Beauty matters. At Columbine, we view nature's beauty as a primary decorating theme, bringing natural colors, textures, and objects into our classrooms. We use the natural attraction that exists in the human heart to draw students and parents into deeper engagement. Stepping into a classroom, visitors immediately feel the difference – we've brought the outside inside. Wasp nests dangle from pine trunks while part of the Kindergarten space features an Aspen grove floor to ceiling. Skulls and furs are on display beside primitive hunting and fire-making tools. Parents and students breathe a sigh of appreciation as their eyes confirm that things are different here. They sense a contrast between our approach and the white-walls and straight rows of a public-school environment. More than one parent has turned to us and murmured softly, "I wish I could go to school here." Beauty matters.

In summary, Jesus calls us to go into the world, living in a way that throws light into the darkness. As educators, we can respond to this call by expanding our focus to those beyond the bounds of the Adventist church.

**Opening our doors widely allows us to extend Christ's compassion into a hurting world, grounds us in our faith and brings greater accountability that steers us towards excellence.**

Instead of a system struggling to survive, this vision could re-invigorate SDA education, giving an untapped outlet to our deep sense of mission. Teachers could move to the frontlines of ministry.

Jake is standing at the door in his purple-fringed cowboy shirt. Kindergarten hasn't exactly worked out for him in public school. His mom looks expectantly around the room. You decide. What about the Jake's? The Kelseys? Will you invite them in?

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