

The Five Percent Solution: Making the “Vision” Viable Again

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The Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education released in April, 1983 with the attention grabbing title “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform” is credited by many with triggering educational reform in this country.¹ Now, more than 27 years since its publication, some recommendations continue to be addressed while others have been widely ignored, such as the recommendation that school districts lengthen the number of days in the school year to between 200 and 220 days.

Adventist Education at Risk

Adventist Education has also been the focus of reform in recent years. Educators of note have written articles and books on the topic. Studies have been commissioned. Summits have been held. Innovative programs have been initiated. But after the keynote addresses at conventions, after the widespread buzz about the new book has died down, after the studies have been published, and educators return to their respective places of labor, life goes on as before, but not due to a lack of commitment or desire to affect change, or to improve the school and the educational system.

A challenge facing principals is that they wear too many hats. The principal’s responsibilities in the Adventist school system include, among other things, being the marketing director, bill collector, school board secretary, business manager, problem solver, mediator, and instructional leader. As a result, the principalship becomes a matter of doing what is needed to survive, not always predicated on what they *should* be doing to affect change and improve the school to meet the needs of a changing constituency and demanding stakeholders.

¹ A Nation at Risk, www.ncrel.org

Two Major Challenges: Decreasing Enrollment and the Disappearing Dollar

K-12 enrollment in the North American Division has been in a steady decline for more than a decade.

The chart below illustrates declining enrollment for the Pacific Union Conference from 2000 – 2009 aligned with membership and tithe for the same period:

PACIFIC UNION	2000	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
K-8 TOTAL	12,493	10,973	10,632	9,969	9,493	9,000
Senior Acad.	4,281	4,400	4,433	4,471	4,319	4,101
K-12 TOTAL	16,774	15,373	15,065	14,440	13,812	13,101
Membership	204,475	209,775	211,152	212,947	216,055	219,828
Union Tithe	\$132,807,224	\$168,499,200	\$169,038,542	\$176,045,961	\$167,123,250	\$162,415,112

The Pacific Union has seen a decline in K-12 enrollment particularly at the elementary level where the K-8 enrollment has declined by an alarming 22% during the past ten years. During the same period there has also been an increase in total tithe and membership.²

The Alumni Awards Foundation (AAF), with its stated mission “to awaken the Adventist community to the *full potential* of the Adventist education system” and with the goal of facilitating a “rebirth in Adventist K-12 education”, held a Focus Group meeting in Riverside, California on September 19, 2009. Guests at this session identified several barriers that needed to be overcome in order for Adventist education to become viable again. One of those barriers was insufficient financial resources: “Even before the recession, most Adventist schools were already facing the stark realities of a lack of funding.

² Pacific Union Conference Statistical Reports, September 2009

Many families who send their children to Adventist schools cannot afford it and are very dependent on financial aid. Some schools are located in regions that have become too expensive, or in areas where the Adventist population is dwindling.”³

The “barrier” identified by the AAF validates findings of a demographic survey conducted for the North American Division Secretariat in 2007-2008 based on 931 random telephone interviews with church member families across the North American Division.⁴ A few of the conclusions lend credence to the perspective that a lack of finances lie at the heart of the problem of declining enrollment and other perceived deficiencies in Adventist education:

- “Two in five Adventists in North America live in households with incomes of less than \$25,000 a year, a category that includes the working poor as well as those below the poverty line.”
- “Nearly a third of Adventists (30 percent) are from the lower middle class or households with annual incomes of \$25,000 to \$49,999.”
- “A quarter of Adventist families fall into the middle (16 percent) and upper middle (8 percent) segments of the socioeconomic spectrum with annual household incomes of \$50,000 to \$99,999.”
- “Just seven percent of members live in households where the annual income is \$100,000 or more. Those in their 40s and 30s are more likely to be in this segment as are those who identify their ethnicity as white.”

The authors of the study observed that “if the economic profile of the membership declines, then this will place some additional stress on church finances. The greatest difficulty may be related to Christian

³ <http://www.pilotlightpodcast.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/riverside-summit-notes.pdf> Viewed on October 11, 2010

⁴ Demographic Survey Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America

education as there are a growing number of families who would find it more difficult to meet the cost of tuition, etc.”⁵

The Adventist K-12 school system is a “church school” system based on counsel from Ellen White that *“There should be schools established wherever there is a church or company of believers. Teachers should be employed to educate the children of Sabbath-keepers.”*⁶ The church supported system of education has served the Adventist Church remarkably well since its inception. Ellen White even admonished the Church to operate the school in a fiscally responsible manner.⁷ The NAD Working Policy contains 49 pages of information about K-12 education but not a line about the funding of education.⁸ However, the Adventist church and the educational system in North America have changed in many ways since the inception of this program and it calls for a new model of “funding the vision”.

A few more salient observations from the NAD Demographic Survey⁹:

- The number of church-related families in the child-rearing years is declining more rapidly than the overall growth of the denomination can make up for. The result is a constricting pool of potential students in the Adventist community.
- The median age for Seventh-day Adventists in North America is 51. There is a significant trend toward the “graying of Adventism” in North America. Adventists are over-represented among those 55 years of age and older.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ http://egwhite.eu/egw_textonly//textonly/writings/publication.php?lang=en&bookCode=PH140&collection=2§ion=all&pagenumber=24&QUERY=There+should+be+schools+established+wherever+there+is+a+church+or+company+of+believers&resultId=3 Viewed on October 11, 2010

⁷ http://egwhite.eu/egw_textonly//textonly/writings/publication.php?lang=en&bookCode=15MR&collection=2§ion=all&pagenumber=52&QUERY=church+school+system&resultId=5 Viewed October 11, 2010

⁸ NAD Working Policy 2009-2010, FEA -1-FA-49

⁹ *Op cit, NAD Demographic Survey*

- The percentage of whites in the Adventist Church in North America has declined over the past two decades to about half the membership. At the same time there has been significant growth among minority groups.

Based on these findings, the two questions worthy of consideration are:

1. Who is our “market”? If the market is made up of Adventist children who should be in our schools, can this “market” afford Adventist education?
2. How can we fund Adventist education in a “sustainable” way that can help administrators focus on the essentials of administering a quality school?

Changing Perspective

The church school once seen as an integral part of the ministry of the church is viewed today by many as something to engage in if funds are available. Constituent churches faced with the reality of fewer dollars available to sustain the ministries of the church see the church school as a burden, or as something that competes with funds needed for evangelism. This view expressed by some pastors today was challenged by Reuben Hilde a quarter century ago. Hilde served Adventist education with distinction, including the position of Dean of the School of Education, La Sierra University. He reasoned that “Seventh-day Adventist education provides the most sustained, comprehensive type of evangelism the church can provide” and that there was emerging a false dichotomy within Adventism that sought to separate education and evangelism as two distinct ministries, failing to see that they are in fact one. Hilde observed that “Instead of education and evangelism being seen as complementary programs in the outreach of the church, they are perceived as being in competition.”¹⁰

Funding the Vision – The Proposal

Some churches are “required” to support (be a constituent of) a K-8 and a 9-12 church school in the area while it is optional in other conferences. There are many churches that embrace Adventist education and support it with funds making it the largest expenditure in the church budget. The concept of a mandated

¹⁰ R. L. Hilde <http://circle.adventist.org/browse/resource.phtml?leaf=5545> JAE Vol. 48, No. 4, April-May, 1986 (Viewed Sept. 10, 2010)

church-school constituency relationship, however, is not working in many areas and has not worked for some time as evidenced by unpaid church subsidies to schools coupled with the lack of pastoral presence at many school boards resulting in the school's indebtedness to the conference. If we truly believe that the work of education and redemption are one¹¹ and that Adventist education is evangelism in action—year round, perhaps it is time to put dollars behind that belief and fund Adventist education as though it were a ministry, an evangelistic outreach of the church! Schools in the Pacific Union report the baptism of more than five-hundred students each year. Larry K. Downing, an ordained minister of the Adventist Church, expressed the following candid opinion in the Spectrum Blog *“The evangelistic programs we spend millions to support are not effective in attracting new members.”*¹²

Proposal - Step One: Fund Adventist Education, with additional tithe funds

A. Churches will be asked to pay an amount between 2% to 5% (*percentages are presented in concept/principle, not as rigid numbers*) of tithe directly to the conference to help fund K-12 education in that conference. In 2009 this formula would have yielded **\$8,120,756.00** in the Pacific Union.

Conference	2009 Total Tithe	2% of Tithe	3% of Tithe	5% of Tithe
Arizona	\$10,212,346	\$204,247	\$306,370	\$510,617
Central California	\$24,663,393	\$493,268	\$739,901	\$1,233,170
Hawaii	\$5,172,056	\$103,441	\$155,162	\$258,603
Nevada-Utah	\$6,373,480	\$127,470	\$191,204	\$318,674
Northern California	\$37,356,840	\$747,137	\$1,120,705	\$1,867,842
Southeastern California	\$45,574,305	\$911,486	\$1,367,229	\$2,278,715
Southern California	\$33,062,692	\$661,254	\$991,881	\$1,653,135

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Education*, p.30

¹² Larry G. Downing, Jr. Spectrum July 2, 2008 “Confronting the Challenges in Adventist Education” <http://www.spectrummagazine.org/node/742>

- B. Conferences currently retain 55% to 60% of tithe for conference operations. Each conference will be permitted to withhold an additional 5% of tithe before tithe is forwarded to the Union Conference in support of K-12 education in that conference. This would have yielded an additional **\$8,120,756.00** in 2009 for education in the Pacific Union.
- C. The Pacific Union distributed \$4,137,080 in NAD reversion funds in 2009 to local conferences for education and an additional \$2,640,689 in tithe reversion funds from NAD for evangelism. This proposal is suggesting the addition of another 30% percent of “tithe reversion funds” received by local conferences for evangelism which would have provided an additional \$792,207 to education.

Under this proposal, principals will no longer have to bother pastors with delinquent subsidies. Pastors and principals can forge new relationships driven by the same purpose—the education and salvation of each student in our schools. Conference boards of education can focus time and energies on operating the school system without having to deal with the tenuous relationships between churches and schools because of subsidies owed to the schools. Additionally, this plan may usher in a renewed sense of belonging and shared mission on the part of educators and pastors on behalf of our children and young people.

For those who might still believe in the long-standing practice in the Adventist church that only pastoral ministers can be paid from tithe, one should consider a statement from the White Estate on Ellen White’s perspective regarding who can be paid from tithe funds: *“For Ellen White the ministers in the ‘generally-accepted’ sense of the word were men appointed by the conference as licensed ministers or ordained ministers . . . as worthy of tithe support.”*¹³ Would this not apply to educators who are licensed ministers?

¹³ <http://whiteestate.org/issues/egw-tithe.htm>

Proposal - Step Two: *Change School Board Structure*

The Conference K-12 Board of Education delegates the operation of K-12 schools to a local, constituent church appointed school board which includes the church pastor. Therefore each constituent church would have at least two voting school board members. Depending on the school's Constitution and Bylaws, the church may qualify to have additional members. A school with 10 constituent churches would have at least 20 school board members not including the school principal and the school assistant business manager. An academy with 30 constituent churches would have over 60 school board members. Most school boards are poorly attended, and almost never have full attendance.

Under this new proposal for a more effective board, the Conference K-12 Board of Education will appoint a 6-7 member school board for each school that is representative of the school/church community, and through the superintendents train school board members. Karl Kime, an attorney and school board chairman is one of many voices in favor of downsizing the school board *"A smaller board would more closely resemble the boards of secular schools and corporations, which typically include a limited group of individuals with a strong personal and professional stake in the success of the organization. Although such boards are far from perfect, they do exhibit the advantage of efficiency and responsiveness to the interests of the larger communities they serve."*¹⁴

Proposal - Step Three: *Create a Distinct Adventist Identity*

Essential 1: School clearly identified as an Adventist school. In recent years many Adventist school boards/constituencies have changed or modified the official name of the school so that it is not visibly identified as an Adventist school, but as a "Christian" school. School boards/constituencies must take formal action to identify the school as an Adventist school.

Essential 2: Adventist perspective is actively promoted. Adventists have a unique mission and perspective on origins, life and the hereafter. Concerted efforts must be

¹⁴ Karl I. Kime, "Streamlining the Adventist School Board", JAE, <http://education.gc.adventist.org/jae> Summer 2008

made to maintain a degree of transparency so that activities on campus and off campus will reflect Adventist ideals and principles.

Essential 3: Restructured, affordable tuition to make Adventist education more affordable for Adventist families including multi-tuition discounts for two or more children from one family.

Essential 4: Levy a non-Adventist student surcharge (tuition difference between Adventist and non-Adventist tuition rate) to be collected and sent to the conference treasury.

Adventist educators must recommit to the principles of Adventist education. Monte Sahlin got to the core issue by offering this perspective of our mission as Adventists, writing that *“The vast majority of Adventist churches have only two major missional objectives-public evangelism and Christian education. Many of them invest in Christian education about eight times what they invest in public evangelism. The church school is the primary missionary project of most Adventist congregations in North America.”*¹⁵ Systemic changes are never easy, especially when dealing with philosophical perspectives steeped in a practice going back more than a hundred years. The challenges to Adventist education are many. This article has sought to focus on a possible solution to the twin problems of declining enrollment and the lack of funding needed to operate a viable and mission-fulfilling school. The dream of making the vision viable can become a reality if we who are vested with the powers and authority of leadership would explore ALL options, all available resources for our children today and for the future of the Adventist church tomorrow.

¹⁵ **Monte Sahlin** – “Pastor and Teacher Cooperating for Success”, JAE Vol. 48, NO. 1, October-November, 1985 <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae198548010804.pdf> (viewed on September 10, 2010)