

SBC Christian Schools: Stretched by Success

by Kenneth S. Coley

Christian schools throughout our convention are experiencing overwhelming success and rapid expansion. However, most of these schools are also dealing with the inevitable challenges and growing pains that accompany such growth. Over six hundred Christian schools are now affiliated with a Southern Baptist church, and most of these schools have escalating enrollments. Their influence is vital as they partner with parents and churches to teach a Christian world view to our next generation.

The data reported in this article were collected in a survey of pastors and administrators at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Association of Christian Schools (SBACS). Many of its leaders, like their president, Ed Gamble from First Academy (First Baptist) in Orlando, Florida, have been involved in Christian education for decades. At this summer's conference in Nashville, Tennessee, leaders

from twenty-two schools responded to survey questions focusing on different aspects of development. The questionnaire was distributed at one of the plenary sessions held at the Sunday School Board. The questionnaires were collected following the session with a response rate near 100 percent.

Three trends related to growth emerged from the survey of member Southern Baptist schools.

Numerical Growth

An amazing 80 percent of the schools indicate they are growing, and half of these have waiting lists. Only 20 percent report a pattern of no growth, and no schools are in decline. It comes as no surprise then that over half the schools say they are out of space. Of the schools responding, only 13 percent report they have room to grow. As a matter of fact, two-thirds of these leaders say they are either in a

building program, in the planning phase to build, or in the process of looking for property to respond to current and future demand.

Financial Challenges

Tuition dollars are being stretched like never before and, in most cases, fall short of providing the school with the income it needs to achieve its goals. Given this short fall, what are their leaders doing to make up the difference? Over half of the schools ask for contributions from students' families in addition to the tuition they pay. Why ask for donations beyond tuition costs? In addition to the constant concern for improving teachers' salaries, one-third of the schools report being in the midst of a capital fund-raising campaign. Most administrators have determined that increasing tuition costs significantly to cover these expenses would eliminate many of their students and families from participation in the school.

Beyond families of students, member schools turn to the sponsoring church and their own alumni. Of these, 66 percent

indicate these are two outside sources. Only 12 percent receive contributions from other churches, and none of the schools surveyed receive money from a local association of churches.

In short, over two-thirds of the schools report depending on tuition and fees for 90 percent or more of the income that it takes to meet their budgets. And most schools expect another 5 percent to be collected by fund-raising, which usually means more money from their families.

The concept of employing a development director whose responsibility it would be to raise money from other sources has not caught on in these schools as it has with most independent schools. Of member schools, 72 percent have not hired such a person. Only 13 percent have a full-time director of development. Consequently, the principal is expected to fulfill this responsibility, but 55 percent reported spending very little time (less than 5 percent of their work week) pursuing other sources of income.

Unfortunately, one category that suffers because of this is scholarship grants and aid. Though member schools discuss wanting to help families who have financial needs, 48 percent of member schools grant 2 percent or less of their total budget for this purpose. The number increases to 86 percent for those granting 10 percent or less for financial aid.

Curriculum Development

The material that is presented in classrooms and the methods of instruction used to present them are vital dimensions of Christian schools. The full range of developing, monitoring, and evaluating a school's instructional program is very demanding and can be especially time consuming for the principal. Half of the respondents say they have purchased school-wide curriculum programs from Christian publishers, while only one-third say they have curriculum primarily designed by their own faculty. Strong interest was expressed in LifeWay's new textbooks for Christian schools; 30 percent are already

planning to use them, and another 48 percent are planning to evaluate them.

Time for the administrator, like tuition money, is being stretched. Of those involved in training and observing teachers, 94 percent report spending less than ten hours per week. When asked about curriculum development, planning, and evaluation, 10 percent invest time each day, 45 percent set aside time each week, and 36 percent deal with their issues on a seasonal basis.

Implications

The responses by the leaders of these twenty-two schools indicate that some of the resources that are vital to the success of a school are being stretched thin by the continual expansion. This former principal believes the following concepts must be given serious consideration:

Leadership Training. The continued training of current administrators and the recruitment and training of new ones is vitally

important. SBACS and our seminaries have to play an aggressive role in developing leaders who are prepared to meet the expanding demands of our Christian schools.

Lifeway School Curriculum. School leaders do not have the time nor expertise to develop the high quality resources our students must have. They are eager for Lifeway to assist them by offering textbooks and curriculum guides.

Teacher Training. SBACS and our seminaries and colleges must take an active role in training new and experienced teachers. This survey indicates that not enough time is being invested on a regular basis at the school level. This is even more crucial in cases where schools hire teachers who have had no formal training in classroom methods and teaching techniques.

Financial Support From Other Churches. Churches which do not sponsor a school need to actively support the Christian schools in their area. One such approach would be for every church to establish a

scholarship program for families in their congregation. This support would allow schools to continue to increase tuition rates to meet growing financial demands without illuminating families who have difficulty paying these higher rates.

Training in Financial Development. School board members and administrators who lack skills in the area of financial development need training to discover and cultivate other sources of income beyond tuition and fees. Only the schools which do this will keep pace with the demands that will come with maturation and expansion.

Conclusion

Every aspect of Christian schooling is experiencing growth and expansion. Our pastors and churches should look for opportunities to be directly involved in assisting the Christian schools in their communities. The pastors, administrators, and board members who have been given the stewardship of our schools must continue to seek

God for inspiration and direction for forward looking plans as God blesses our work and the generation we are training to glorify Him.