

Pursue Excellence!

How would you respond if someone asked you what the ideal school looks like? Maybe you'd name the school your children attend, and you would sing its praises. Or maybe the perfect school exists only in your mind. Whether the school is real or imaginary, you and any other Christian parent would likely agree that the best schools produce graduates who are spiritually mature, culturally engaged, and academically prepared. After all, graduates with those qualities are the ones most likely to have a strong, positive influence in society and the world. In light of today's economic and political uncertainties, we certainly need those graduates in future generations.

Knowledge, spiritual maturity, and cultural engagement are clearly important; they're even mentioned in Scripture. Luke made a point to say that "Jesus increased in wisdom (in broad and full understanding) and in stature ... and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52, Amplified Bible). Jesus needed to be equipped in all three areas to carry out God's mission.

At ACSI, we firmly believe that all three aspects of education are worthy of our member schools' investment. That's one reason we recently cosponsored the *Cardus Education Survey*—a study of graduates aged 24 to 39 from public schools, home-schools, Catholic schools, Protestant schools, and nonreligious private schools. Researchers also surveyed Protestant and Catholic school administrators and teachers. We sought to learn whether Christian education delivers on its promises.

In a previous issue of *Christian School Comment* I shared the encouraging data the survey revealed about Protestant schools: their graduates are mature, committed believers who produce spiritual fruit. These young adults are involved in their churches and communities at the grassroots level. I also touched on an area of concern that the study showed: mediocre academics. Though Protestant Christian schools score higher than the national norm on standardized tests, overall

they are much less academically rigorous than their Catholic counterparts. As one of our member school administrators, Gary Arnold, wrote in ACSI's *Christian School Education*, "There are telling indicators that Protestant Christian schooling is not setting the academic pace," and "the Cardus data serve as good leverage for our maturation as academic institutions" (2012/2013, vol. 16, no. 2: 22).

ACSI is a leading association for Christian schools; therefore, ACSI leaders are concerned about these findings. We would love to see more of our member schools mature academically. However, we do have more good news to share that hasn't been released to the general public until now, and I believe it merits your attention. ACSI commissioned Cardus to do additional research to compare ACSI-accredited schools with the general findings. The Cardus data specific to accredited schools revealed that, on average, these schools require more rigorous course loads in math, science, English, languages, civics, social studies, art or music, and Bible than all other programs surveyed (Pennings et al. 2011, 155–163). Also, ACSI-accredited schools, on average, offer more Advanced Placement courses than other Protestant schools (153). On average, more ACSI-accredited schools offer dual enrollment options for both college course credits at local universities and distance learning through online courses than any other program surveyed (188, 190).

This is fantastic news! ACSI-accredited schools produce graduates who are the salt and light in their communities and churches while also *serving as institutions of academic rigor, as Christian schools should*. The accreditation services that ACSI provides truly help schools improve and strive for excellence in every way.

A few years ago I heard Dr. Richard Riesen, who leads a Christian college preparatory school, speak to Christian



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school leaders. He made a strong statement regarding academic rigor. He said that if a school wants to call itself *Christian*, mediocrity is unacceptable. If a Christian school isn't committed to academic rigor and excellence, its leaders should drop either *Christian* or *school* from the institution's name. Christian schools must be about excellence in everything they do, including academic rigor; otherwise, the name of Jesus is being tarnished.

Moreover, academic excellence is crucial if Christian schools are going to produce graduates who can transform their societies. Riesen wrote in *Piety and Philosophy*, "It will not do for Christians simply to complain of the godlessness of modern science or philosophy. They must themselves engage the world intellectually, even at the cutting edge" (2002, 107).

As the acting president for ACSI, I'm using the additional Cardus findings both to commend our ACSI-accredited member schools and programs and to challenge our members who are not yet accredited. Yes, our accreditation program

requires an investment of time and finances, but we believe this investment is worthwhile so that our schools can measure up spiritually, culturally, *and* academically.

I encourage you, as a Christian school parent, to do the same. If your child attends an ACSI-accredited school, thank the faculty and staff for making such a valuable investment. Your child does attend "the ideal school" in many ways. If your child's school is not yet accredited, would you encourage the administrator to pursue excellence in that way?

References

- Pennings, Ray, et al. 2011. *Cardus education survey: ACSI oversampling report*. Hamilton, ON: Cardus.
Riesen, Richard A. 2002. *Piety and philosophy: A primer for Christian schools*. Phoenix, AZ: ACW Press.



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