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CULTIVATING

Cultivating

How is it that graduates of Christian schools are more likely to believe that general society is hostile to their views? What does this say about our teaching, learning, and school structures?



TRUST IS DEFINED AS a firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something. This belief in the reliability of someone or something is a foundational aspect of our interpersonal relationships, our social fabric, and our civil society; indeed shared life is impossible without trust! When trust is eroded it has a deep impact on both our interpersonal and organizational relationships.

Trust is also a foundational aspect of our faith. The Bible speaks often of trust including this well-

known reference in Proverbs 3: 5-6: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

In her YouTube talk, “The Anatomy of Trust,” Brené Brown quotes Charles Feldman who characterized trust as “choosing to make something important to you, vulnerable to the actions of someone else.” Brown contends that when we trust we are “braving connection with someone or something.”

Sadly, it seems that trust is in short supply today,

CIVIC TRUST

Civic Trust



perhaps in a more striking way than many of us have experienced in our lifetime. High divorce rates, broken friendships, and estranged families disclose a lack of interpersonal trust while alternative news networks, protests, accusations of electoral fraud, insurrection, conspiracy theories, and cancel culture divulge our lack of collective or civic trust. When trust is lost, we all pay a heavy price as our mistrust breeds suspicion, anger, accusation, acrimony, and division.

The Cardus Education Survey – 2018 BC Bulletin* provides some fascinating research on trust:

Trust is the bedrock of a shared life together. Without it, we cannot live with one another for long. In terms of graduates' civic orientations, our survey seeks to find in what (or in whom) people trust. Overall, our findings indicate that religious school attendance doesn't reduce overall trust except trust in neighbours for evangelical Protestants, who are much more likely to believe the

* <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/cardus-education-survey-2018-british-columbia-bulletin/>

general society is hostile to their views; however, the non-religious independent schools have done a good job in cultivating a higher-than-average sense of civic trust.

Evangelical Protestants are less likely to trust their neighbours and strangers; however, the non-religious independent and independent Catholic are more likely.

As someone who has spent his life's work in evangelical Protestant schools, this research stings! Graduates of the schools I served display less civic trust, trust of neighbour, and trust of strangers than graduates of other independent schools, including those which are non-religious! My initial reaction to this research was one of shock and disappointment. These findings do not seem to resonate with our lofty mission statements that laud Christian schools' transforming impact on society.

How is it that graduates of Christian schools are more likely to believe that general society is hostile to their views? What does this say about our teaching, learning, and school structures?

Christian schools intentionally isolate students, often referring to biblical passages such as Deut. 6: 5-9 to justify this type of segregated organizational structure.

The Cardus research indicates that Christian schools may be effective at segregating in order to nurture, but perhaps have lost their way somewhat with respect to our connection and engagement with the broader culture. Could it be that over time, we have become increasingly isolated and less concerned or willing to engage with the society in which we live? Could it be that we have become

overly insular in our schools and overly suspicious of the other in our teaching and learning? Could our compelling vision of the opportunity of impacting the world for Christ have been exchanged for a vision focussing on the threat and hostility of society to our faith?

Perhaps we need to recalibrate our thinking and practice to enhance our students' civic trust. History has plenty of examples of the dangers of either blind trust or rampant mistrust of civil authorities. We should work hard to avoid these extremes while heeding the Bible's call for the faithful to engage, recognizing that we are blessed to be a blessing. It is impossible to love our neighbours if we don't embody appropriate civic trust. Could our lack of civic trust belie a lack of trust in the sovereign God?

We approach the threshold of mature faith when we come to the realization that God does not need us—he wants us. He does not rely upon our service or protection, but delights in our presence and love. If your faith feels like a heavy burden,

and if you feel the constant need to defend God's honour, could it be because you have been carrying a false god?

—SKYE JETHANI

Jeremiah 29: 4-9 can be instrumental in helping us recalibrate. This chapter is a message from God to his people, who are in exile in Babylon. God's people are confused, defeated, fearful, and mistrusting. Their destiny as God's chosen people seems to have been turned upside down as they find themselves captives in a strange and hostile land.



This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they, too, may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.

This message likely shocked many of God’s people in Babylon; think of the sentiments expressed in Psalm 137. Despite being a conquered people in a strange and hostile land, God’s message to his people is to engage – build houses, settle down, plant gardens, marry your sons and daughters. Then he goes further commanding his people to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city ... for if it prospers, you too will prosper.” God does not want his people to isolate in protective bubbles; he wants them to be engaged with society and to work towards peace and prosperity of the other!

God also warns of those who give a false message about what to do in Babylon – although they claim to be delivering God’s message they are deceivers! Today there are many proclaiming contrary versions of what God is calling us to do. We need the discernment of the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) to sort out the messages that reflect God’s intentions from the false manifestations.

Theoretically, students in Christian schools are isolated so that they can be safely educated in an intellectual and social environment that is founded on God’s word, which will equip and enable them to be faithful disciples, impacting the society with the transforming love of Jesus.

God’s message through Jeremiah is clear: avoid the extremes of isolation or assimilation and engage, seeking the blessing of the city. God promises that his people flourish when they contribute to the flourishing of those around them.

How are Christian schools seeking the blessing of the cities and regions in which we find ourselves? How are we engaging in the public sphere, seeking to bless those who may have differing opinions, values, and lifestyles? We live in times of increasing secularism which many Christians view as a threat to communities of faith. When facing a threat, the natural inclination is to shelter in place, creating barriers and protections as we isolate with like-minded folks. Perhaps, despite our

lofty mission statements about engaging culture, many Christian schools have increasingly become protecting bubbles of safety, shielding ourselves from “the other.”

In such circumstances, it is no surprise that graduates of Christian schools demonstrate a lack of civic trust. If we are not active in our communities, connecting with institutions and leaders outside of our homogeneous faith community, then we will lack relationship and trust. John Mark Comer, in his book *Garden City*, shares a beautiful understanding of the Bible’s clarion call for Christians to be active participants in all aspects of God’s creation, including civic institutions.

May we, as Christian schools existing in a secular and pluralistic society, engage in our communities working, praying, and actively pursuing the common good so that our communities may be blessed. The rich promise of Jeremiah 29 is that our flourishing will follow. 🌱

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Recovering Community

*How can we reshape the culture of our school communities
in light of what we have learned over the past two years?
What will be the design of this new place we find ourselves in?*

“And here’s the great thing about being in the wilderness. You get to go to the heights and the depths, and the length and the breadth of the love of God in a way you never could if you’d remained inside where it was safe.”

—SARAH BESSEY

IN MARCH 2020, LIFE as we knew it changed overnight. We could not visit family, attend church services, meet with our colleagues, go out to eat, work out in a gym... we became isolated in our homes. Our world shrunk. We were thrust into the wilderness of a global pandemic. We experienced trauma. Each of us have our own personal stories about our journey through the constantly changing landscape of the past two years. But we also have a communal story, that of our schools and their communities.

As schools closed their doors, students moved to online learning and all of us worked from our homes. Daily routines shifted and new strategies for learning, working, and being community were discovered. The

fabric of our school communities changed without the physical presence of one another. Beyond the obvious challenges for learning, it was also difficult to authentically connect with families and schools’ larger support communities.

It was with a profound sense of relief that schools opened their doors this September. Expectations ran high for a return to “normal.” But it has been anything but that as schools continue to deal with COVID exposures, the polarization of views regarding vaccines and masks and for some, an erosion of trust as schools worked to adhere to provincial mandates. There continues to be frustration, confusion, and yes, even grief! We are still trying to find our way through the wilderness of the pandemic. And then as if that wasn’t enough, here in BC we experienced devastating wildfires, catastrophic flooding, and mudslides that shut down our highways. It is tempting to cry out, “Where are you, God?”

But He is here! In the midst of the wilderness God calls us to peace and rest.



“Shalom I leave with you. My shalom I give to you; not as the world gives, give I to you. Don’t let your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful.”

—JOHN 14:27

Our God is in control and He is faithful. He meets us where we are; you have experienced His goodness through the beautiful actions of many in your school communities who have reached out to encourage and serve as Christ’s hands and feet during these challenging times.

“This is what Jesus had in mind: folks coming together, forming close-knit communities, and meeting each other’s needs” —SHANE CLAIBORNE

We are resilient and we will recover, but we need to acknowledge that life as we knew it may be forever changed. How can you now reshape the culture of your school community in light of what you have learned over the past two years? What will be the design of this new place you find yourselves in?

As you have new opportunities to reconnect in person, what can you do to recover community, to stitch yourselves back together and emerge stronger than before, building unity in diversity?

Consider that perhaps you are being invited into a better story, not returning to the old story. My invitation is for you to move forward confidently, trusting the maker of the heavens to cover you with the shadow of his mighty hand even in the wilderness, to rebuild flourishing communities as part of God’s story of renewal.

Can you see new opportunities to foster connection and belonging among your staff, student, family, and extended support communities? Is it time to help each other refocus on Who we belong to, what He is calling us to do, and how as school communities we are going to move forward as His instruments of kindness, peace, love, and care? Because, of course, our schools are not physical buildings, they are communities of learning that are

built on trusting relationships among their members.

If we have learned nothing else during the pandemic it is that we are made for community and that we profoundly long for it. Rachel Held Evans spoke about how seductively our culture lures us away from community and how challenging it is to really restore and foster it. She wrote that we can be so convicted and inspired to live our lives alongside other people and yet frustrated by the excuses we find not to. We convince ourselves that community will have to wait until we have got it all together and until everyone else has it together too. We have convinced ourselves that a community is a place without sin, conflict, or change. The great irony, she says, is that community thrives on imperfections. Where one person is weak, another is strong. When one person cooks, another can clean, another can teach, and another can lead. Where one sees the forest, the other sees trees. We need community precisely because we are imperfect, and if we wait until we are perfect to embrace community, it will never happen.

Can we step back and reflect on how this unprecedented time may have altered our perceptions of each other, acknowledge our imperfections, and have the courage to reach out to one another with the love of Christ? Because if we truly want to excel in being community, our relationships need to match the spiritual reality that in Christ we have been graced, loved, forgiven, guided, blessed, comforted, and sustained. We are part of an evolving story where creation is being restored, people are being forgiven, and the future is good. We are building school cultures that reflect the heights and the depths, and the length and the breadth of the love of God. 🌈

“There can be unwavering peace today when an uncertain tomorrow is trusted to an unchanging God.”

—ANN VOSKAMP

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What Matters?

A school's true mission
is its lived mission

AS EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, who call themselves Christian, conversations about formation and spirituality can very quickly mirror similar conversations being had at church. It is not a stretch to imagine being drawn into conversations with colleagues and parents who suggest that chapel, prayer, and Bible class make the school a “Christian” school. While these are significant parts of a school experience, chapels, prayers, and Bible classes are not inherently Christian. The aim of each of these elements of the learning experience, and that of all other elements, is what determines the type of formation taking place in the school. It is the daily practices at school which show what truly matters to the staff at the school.

What Matters!



This is about me.

A school can ascribe to an outward-focused mission. Yet, when engaged in practices which pit student against student while celebrating individual achievement over communal responsibility, students are being formed into a self-centred way of being. When learning stays within the school walls and focuses on content acquisition or competency development as an end, students are being formed sometimes without their knowing, into seeing learning first and foremost as a tool for self-promotion, self-sufficiency, and independent accomplishment at the expense of the other.



I am not my own!

The Heidelberg Catechism reminds students and staff about their place in the world:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The gospel story is a story of interdependence. To live into the gospel story as an educational institution, is to encourage learners in embracing the message that the main purpose of learning is to become better equipped to help others. Schools are invited to ask themselves, “Do our daily practices and pedagogy invite students and staff into loving God and others more?”



I am on my own.

As students develop, it is natural to expect more from them. Developing a level of independent decision making allows them to flourish in their community. When we engage in predominantly punitive discipline or hold students accountable to inconsistent attendance without hearing their story, students are formed to live into a story of the educational system as a game to be played. When structures are not in place to ensure that students form relationships with adults in the school, there is a disconnect between word and action. When mistakes and insufficient evidence of learning are met with silence and/or a poor grade without multiple iterations to show mastery, students are learning that they cannot trust the adults in the building to support them in their time of need. When this is combined with structures, making true relationship almost impossible, such as one teacher teaching over 100 different students each semester, students learn that the very systems in the school show them that they are, indeed, on their own.



I am here for you!

Every student needs to have at least one adult who shows in word and action that they are on the student's team.

Relationships start with time for eye contact and a smile. Being able to smile is part of God's designed order in the world. When adults take the time to get to know each student by using an opening circle, individual and small group connection time, and/or meeting and naming each student everyday as they enter the classroom, relationships and belonging begin to develop. For students to truly believe that they are being cared for and therefore equipped to see that they can care for others, they need to feel known. Then they are comfortable asking the hard questions knowing that space will be provided to pursue deeper understanding of these hard questions. A place that is for you, is a place where mistakes are truly opportunities to learn, where risk and mistakes actually lead to second, third, and fourth opportunities for mastery. When students feel that the learning process is oriented around learning and students, rather than teachers, the very system will form them to knowing that a Christian community is there for them.

What Matters!



I am going to get a good job.

When middle level teachers are being pressured by secondary teachers to prepare students for secondary so that the secondary teachers can prepare students for university, the very culture of school promotes student formation reinforcing that the goal of school is not learning, rather financial security. When career education is about job opportunities, rather than vocation, service, and development of skill, students are formed to see learning as a means to support consumerism and materialism. When practices focus on personal achievement with no expectation of responsibility to the other learners, the story students are living in is one of personal wealth and achievement not connected to the impact on the other neighbour both near and far. This formation precipitates the mentality that makes it okay to buy clothes or coffee from companies that do not promote healthy work environments but are out of view and, therefore, can be taken advantage of without guilt.



I am an agent of redemption in the world!

Being agents of redemption takes practice; it does not come naturally in this broken world. Repeated opportunities to see life's small decisions as acts of redemption, healing, and worship set up the learner to be formed in a way that acknowledges their role in God's redemptive work. Behaviour support becomes about noticing the impact of personal decisions on those around you. Systems are put in place to help students understand that mastery of skills or understanding comes with a responsibility and expectation to support others toward mastery. Personal achievement is downplayed; the focus is on growth and development and the pursuit of personal best in character, learning, and supporting the flourishing of others. As educators make structural and pedagogical choices out of the redemptive call on their own lives, the student formation experience invites a deeper commitment to care, interdependence, and communal flourishing.

AS LEARNERS AND AS CHRISTIANS, we choose a life that is oriented beyond our present reality. We work in a constant state of “now and not yet.” As schools intentionally move toward their espoused mission with their structures and their daily practices, schools can know that they are moving toward what truly matters. Community stories of genuine engagement with the mission emerge, as they are celebrated collectively, inertia begins to point toward the mission rather than away from it. No organization drifts to mission actualization. This process is ongoing, will include missteps, and will be always just out of our grasp. May humility guide successes and missteps as the school walks faithfully toward the mission that guides them. 🌈

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SCSBC Director of Learning



A Community of Care

Though many schools are currently challenged by reduced international student numbers, this may be an opportunity to consider how our international programs reflect our values and the impact our communities can have on students and families from abroad. What is at the heart of Christian education for international students in these challenging times?

OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, international students have faced many obstacles in their quest for education abroad: border closures, delayed processing of essential travel documents, cancelled flights, quarantines, COVID tests, and vaccine requirements. Students who have weathered all of these challenges and now study here in Canada are faced with the general fear and anxiety of being far from home during a pandemic. Natural disasters that have devastated our province recently have only added to this stress.

Traditionally, many families choose Canada as a top study destination because our country is known throughout the world as being a welcoming and safe place. When travelling abroad to promote schools,

I have often spoken with prospective parents about how safe it is to live in BC. However, as our province has faced one state of emergency after another, I have considered whether we can justifiably continue to promote BC as a “safe place.” As staff members in Christian schools, we are prudent in providing a secure school environment and home life for international students. We often go beyond the minimal safety protocols required. Nevertheless, we are unable to guarantee our own safety or the protection of those under our care.

Despite this limitation, there is much that we can do to establish security for our students. We can create an environment where they feel comfortable talking to teachers, International Program staff, and school counsellors about their struggles. We

can ensure that students are placed with homestay families who care for them as their own, giving them a sense of belonging. For international students living here with their parents, we can help their families build relationships within the school and local church communities, so they know they are not alone when difficult circumstances arise.

As our world has changed, creating this atmosphere of security and community for our international families has become increasingly important. The care, compassion, and empathy our schools demonstrate could have a significant impact on the future of our International Student Programs. Students and parents who feel cared for are more likely to stay and tell others about their positive experiences. Word-of-mouth is the best promoter in these times when many are hesitant to engage in travel and study abroad.

Many schools currently have their lowest number of international students in many years. While this is a challenge, it is also an opportunity: a chance to look at how we deliver our programs, what we value, and how our communities can serve and impact those from other cultures as well as be impacted by them. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but it is wise for schools to consider the following:

- Do we desire an ethnically diverse program or hope to serve a specific demographic? A diverse program may require accepting students with lower English skills or offering scholarships to those from less affluent nations.

- Is our mission in Christian education to provide a Christ-centered education for the global Christian family or to share Christ with the unreached? Can we do both well?

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- Do we believe it is our role and are we equipped to support diverse needs in English acquisition, academics, and/or mental health?
- Do we desire to facilitate short-term programs where students receive a brief immersion in Christian education and Canadian culture or to focus on long-term students whose lives we build into until their graduation and beyond? Can we effectively do both?

While international student numbers may have decreased, the stories of transformed lives are still being written. A family who is persecuted for their faith in their home country receives a Christian education for their children here. A student who has been bullied his whole life finds a sense of belonging. A student grows in her understanding of what it means to follow Christ,

thus impacting the decisions she makes for her future. God is actively working in and through our International Student Programs, and these challenging times give us the opportunity to reflect the heart of Christian education to those He brings to our schools. 🌍

AMBER WATSON

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International Student Program Coordinator

guiding schools to flourish

"It is impossible for schools to flourish without a high functioning, strategic, exceptional school board and leadership team supporting it."

—Henry Contant

PURPOSE & USE OF THIS BOOK

Built on over thirty years of sharing governance and leadership best practices among faith-based schools in Canada, USA, and Australia, *Guiding Schools to Flourish: Board Governance and School Leadership* is a collection of thirty short articles on school governance and leadership. Written by Executive Directors, **Henry Contant** (2003–2015) and **Edward Noot** (2014–present), for *The Link* magazine, a publication of the Society of Christian Schools in British Columbia (SCSBC).

This practical resource offers on-going professional development for school board members and school leaders with articles featuring three key discussion questions to prompt further board dialogue and reflection. The book can be used to:

- initiate a 'stand-alone' board discussion on a relevant board governance and leadership topic which could be embedded periodically into board agendas
- form the basis for guiding a more in-depth governance training session within an annual school board retreat setting
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—David Hahn

Executive Director, Association of Lutheran Secondary Schools (USA)

"We just finished reading *Guiding Schools to Flourish: Board Governance & School Leadership* and want to declare it is a gold mine! What a gift and legacy you have given to the faith-based schools in BC, across Canada, the USA, and beyond! Thank you so much for this practical and timely resource that speaks into the current reality of our Christian school leaders and their school boards."

—Marianne Vangoor & Ian Timmerman
Edvance Christian Schools Association (Ontario)



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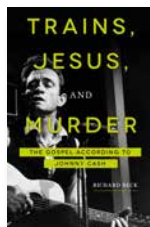
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Recommended Reading



Trains, Jesus, and Murder: The Gospel According to Johnny Cash

Richard Beck
Fortress Press

Author Richard Beck, psychology professor and leader of a prison ministry, offers an accessible, informative, and thought-provoking analysis of the life, songs, and theology of Johnny Cash. Cash was a devoutly Christian singer-songwriter who rose to fame on the country and pop charts in the mid 1950s and continued recording and performing for decades.

As the book recounts, Johnny Cash lived a hard life and struggled with addiction. He also leaned hard on Jesus and never wavered in his faith. Many elements of this book are noteworthy, but two stand out and make it a worthwhile read for Christian school leaders and teachers. First, Cash understood the importance of lament in Christian theology and second, Cash understood that the gospel message was for everyone and he prioritized bringing the gospel to the down and out, the marginalized, and forgotten. Cash courageously and consistently challenged his producers and promoters (along with the social norms of the day), taking the road less traveled, often at great personal and professional cost, to bring his songs (and therefore his theology) to the marginalized (the poor, the addicted, the prisoner, First Nations). Reading this book caused me to wonder if I possess the courage to challenge the social order of our day by calling for justice, embracing hospitality, and serving those on the margins of society. —Ed Noot

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