

How Can We Develop Schools that Are Supportive Learning Communities?

8

Chapter 8 guiding questions

- What are the attributes of supportive learning communities?
- How do we foster supportive learning communities?
- How do we develop teacher collegiality?
- What is the role of parents and other supporters in schools?

The first bell of Faith Christian Community School rings at 8:25 AM. Students flock to the doors. Teachers greet them with a cheery “Good morning!” while making sure that they enter in orderly fashion. The custodian, broom in hand, congratulates some fourth graders on the hall display based on their science unit. The school secretary helps several students. She says to one boy, “Kevin, I appreciate that you came in to tell me right away. But I am disappointed that you forgot to return your uniform again. Let’s think of a way you will be sure to remember tomorrow.”

Principal Hall is the last person to come in. As usual, she has spent the previous fifteen minutes circulating through the school and playground. She talks with and gives words of encouragement to teachers, students, volunteers, and parents. She makes a mental note to speak with two teachers. One of Ms. Brown’s fifth-grade students is troubled about the accidental death of an aunt. And she wants to compliment Mr. Wood. His eighth-grade students are excited about an innovative model they have made of an “ideal” community. Ms. Hall quickly delivers birthday cards to the two rooms where students have birthdays. She also stops in the third-grade class to thank the students and teacher for organizing yesterday’s chapel. There she finds students sharing prayer requests. She stays a few minutes for devotions.

Later in the day, she speaks with a prospective parent who has spent some time in the school. The parent remarks on the warm atmosphere of the school. “Everyone here seems to feel part of a close-knit community. People care for one another.”

Ms. Hall replies that the school consciously works at this. She says, "All of us stand in relation to God as well as to one another. Our school tries to be a community that provides a supportive setting for developing everyone's gifts. That includes students, teachers, volunteers, secretaries, janitors, and, yes, our parents and board members too. We want to help all members of our school community live as disciples of Jesus Christ."

"But other schools also try to be welcoming communities," the parent says. "What, specifically, makes you different?"

"Well, we work together to develop an atmosphere of respect and responsibility. Everyone must experience that he or she plays an important part in making the school a pleasant and meaningful place. Our parents helped us develop a school covenant. It applies to everyone. A key statement is that we treat people with love, respect, and compassion.

"As teachers we make this code part of our school's daily life. At the start of the year, we explain the covenant. Then our students help develop three or four general classroom rules that reflect the covenant. 'Be on time and prepared,' for example. Students also help in setting classroom procedures. The class reviews and practices the rules and procedures, both to give students a sense of security and to develop good habits."

"What does that have to do with being a Christian school? Don't many schools do this kind of thing?"

"Yes, they do," agrees Ms. Hall. "But our sense of community is rooted in our faith commitment. Our school covenant reflects God's covenant of grace with us, as described in Psalm 111. We are neither teacher-centered nor child-centered, but Christ-centered. Jesus offers redemption to each person in the school and allows each of us to use God's creation for His glory. That is why we work at developing a spiritual context that fosters personal and communal commitment. You've seen our prayer bulletin board in the hall and attended our weekly chapels that always involve students. On Monday mornings parents are encouraged to join our staff devotions in the school foyer. On Friday afternoons teachers and students review the week and pray specifically for personal and class needs for the following week. After school on Fridays, our teachers share joys and concerns, and pray for one another and their students."

"I noticed some students in the hall working out some kind of disagreement," says the parent, "What is that all about?"

"Well, we have implemented a schoolwide program of problem and conflict resolution. From kindergarten on, students learn and implement the steps of resolving problems themselves in a peaceful and loving way. Our trained student mediators help prevent problems, especially on the playground. We also team up younger classes with older ones to plan weekly 'buddy' activities. At each grade level, some units address

aspects of what it means to live as followers of Christ in community. And students put these principles into practice not only in their academic learning but also in service learning opportunities.”

“But with all this going on, do you have time to teach all the academics?”

“When schools are places where people really care for one another, research shows that students like school more. Attendance improves. Students interact better socially, with fewer behavior problems. Not only that, but students are more motivated to learn. They work harder and achieve more. We have a sound curriculum and set high expectations for our students. But more than that, our school works hard at implementing what Paul says in his letters about living as a Christian community. That helps us be a place where students learn well. Moreover, we also help students to develop biblical dispositions and to use them and their emotions in socially effective ways. That is as important for how they will function in life as their academic achievement.”

“What else should I know before I decide whether to enroll my child?”

“We believe that open communication is a key to making the school a community. We listen carefully to all students—our school exists for them! We try to be loving and positive. At the same time, we set high expectations for students to do likewise. We want our parents to have regular and open contact with our staff. I will give you a copy of our school information package. Then, if you have any more questions, give me a call.”

The importance of school culture

Schools are significant agents for enculturating children. However, our students live in a society in which biblically based values are frequently ignored and even derided. Children and adolescents often endure serious emotional, social, and ethical problems. These may be brought about by factors such as little parental time for children, family breakdown, increased mobility, hedonistic individualism, waning of religious beliefs, and abuse of various kinds. Moreover, the media are “a corrosive phenomenon that comes between parents and children, threatens nonmaterial human relationships, and undermines democratic values” (Molnar 1997, 164).

Children throughout the world today show increasing anxiety, depression, overdependence, inability to concentrate, loss of temper, aggression, disobedience, and moral insensitivity. Daniel Goleman calls this slide “a new kind of toxicity seeping into and poisoning the very experience of childhood, signifying sweeping deficits in emotional competencies” (1995, 233). He adds that within this context, schools have to go beyond their traditional mission. They must help

children develop and live with emotional, social, and moral proficiency so that they become compassionate, just, and dependable.

Effective schools are much more than collections of individuals going about their own tasks. Rather, they are communities for learning. School communities are united in common ideals and purposes. They share with those in need, are faithful in prayer, and live in harmony with one another (Romans 12). They commit themselves to making learning purposeful and effective for all. Teachers and students appreciate one another's gifts and allow them to flourish. They encourage their use and development for service.

Whether schools function as supportive learning communities depends a great deal on their culture—their beliefs, values, attitudes, ethos, traditions, and celebrations. School culture affects student and teacher attitudes and achievements. If a school culture is negative, it can undermine relationships as well as learning. So schools strive to establish and maintain a culture in which

- Teachers are passionate about implementing the school's vision while remaining open to God's leading in a prayerful, humble way.
- The principal and teachers promote shared values and an atmosphere of shalom. Students feel physically, emotionally, and intellectually secure. The staff treats the students respectfully and fairly.
- The school focuses on purposeful, meaningful, and interesting learning in an orderly environment. Teachers believe that all students can achieve. Teachers and students experience joy as they learn and live together in community. Students have opportunities to share their knowledge and gifts with others, both inside and outside the school.
- The school values individual contributions while encouraging collaborative teamwork. Both focus on efforts to improve all aspects of the school.
- The school community regularly examines whether its vision and stated values agree with those lived in the school. What are the positive and negative aspects of its culture? What do teachers see, hear, and experience in the school? What don't they see, hear, and experience? What things are celebrated? reprimanded? What things are "nondiscussables" that need to be discussed? Is there open and caring communication, relational trust, support for staff and students, interest in learning, and shared decision making? Are restorative practices in place to manage conflicts and tensions? Is the negative confronted head-on, and is the positive celebrated frequently?

No school community is perfect. The power of sin affects both teachers and students. That is why building school communities requires commitment and work. The school's structures must encourage respect and responsibility. School policies must promote the welfare of students, not just administrative

convenience. Community members must strive to create a positive atmosphere throughout the school. Teachers model and insist on courtesy and respect. They teach skills for resolving conflicts. They pay attention to the emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of learning.

While teachers are caring and supportive, they do not make learning painless. They allow students to tackle new topics, overcome challenges, take risks, venture opinions, and make mistakes without feeling threatened or judged. They encourage students to help and collaborate with classmates. Teachers give students a genuine say in the life of the classroom. They also hold them responsible for the community they help to shape.

Roland Barth writes, “The vision is, first, that the school will be a *community*, a place full of adults and students who care about, look after, and root for one another and who work together for the good of the whole, in times of need and in times of celebration” (2002, 11). This chapter considers how schools can develop as communities in which students and teachers can thrive as valued persons created in the image of God. The first aim for school leaders, write Barry and Tye, is “to develop, in the school, a caring community, exercising concern and respect for the welfare of others, and emphasising the overriding importance of good human relations, based upon sensitivity, tolerance and good will” (1972, 44). That aim highlights how obedience to the Great Commandment is fundamental for schools that are considerate and productive learning communities.

Reflect and respond 8-1

Describe your understanding of the term *learning community*. Make a list of four or five characteristics that you believe to be particularly important. Compare this list with the points mentioned by Ms. Hall at the beginning of this chapter in describing her school, and with lists made by two or three other persons. Can you reach a consensus?

Spirituality and school culture

“Teach me your way, O Lord, and ... give me an undivided heart,” the psalmist prays (Psalm 86:11). It is our spiritual heart that sets the direction of our lives and enables us to walk in God’s truth. It is our spiritual heart that makes it possible for us to bring glory to God’s name in our work and studies. It is our undivided spiritual heart that leads to action for our own good and for the good of those around us (Psalm 86:8–13, Jeremiah 32:39).

Even in public schooling more educators are once again recognizing the importance of spirituality (e.g., Anderson 2004; Garner 2007). They understand that the meaning of life transcends the material and the self. Regrettably, spirituality is often defined superficially. Garner, for instance, defines spirit as the “life force that creates, learns, changes.” Classroom strategies then include to “Recognize that students listen more with their hearts than with their heads,” and “Reflect on personal values, beliefs, and feelings about spiritual matters” (137, 146, 147). Teachers do these things mainly by encouraging quiet reflective times when students get in touch with themselves. This practice leads to a spirituality in which God may or may not have a place, depending on personal student choice. Christian schools have a more solid spiritual foundation.

Board members, administrators, teachers, and a good proportion of parents and students in Christian schools share the bond of biblically informed faith in the triune God. That bond is the basis for schools’ being supportive learning communities that honor God. We do have to remember, however, that Christian schools are not churches. In churches, worshipping God and learning about the faith dimension of life are central. In Christian schools, the focus is broader: to prepare students to function in society in competent, trustworthy, and loving ways. So devotional times, worship, and Bible study are not the singular focus of schools. Nevertheless, they are part of the Christian school’s total learning experience. They lead students and teachers to share faith insights and to reflect on the meaning of learning. They help students understand their place in God’s story of salvation. Also, they foster community through fellowship with God and other community members.

Prayer in Christian schools unites the community. Staff and student prayer is meaningful in one-on-one meetings between students and their teachers. The need for prayer often stems from a concern or problem that a student shares with a teacher. Some teachers pray for several students each day before school. They make it a point to pray for each of their students every week or so. Besides personal prayer for their own teaching and learning situations, teachers may also pray with fellow staff members from time to time. I have experienced meaningful prayer on the phone with a colleague when the tasks God had placed before me overwhelmed me. In addition, a staff as a whole also bring praises and requests to God several times a week. Prayer not only changes individuals and situations, it affects the tone of a school and its culture.

Regular chapel services balance daily classroom devotions. The whole school community needs to worship God. Chapels may include biblically based, interesting, and sometimes provocative presentations. These will challenge students to dedicate and rededicate themselves to serve their Savior and Lord as

they learn and study. Enthusiastic singing also strengthens community.

In middle schools and high schools, student committees can plan the chapel schedule in consultation with a teacher. In some schools, different classes are responsible for chapels each week. Student-led chapels require teacher guidance as the students develop leadership skills. Tuned-out fellow students often sit up and notice when they hear a peer attesting to the reality of Jesus Christ in his or her life. Students who feel awkward about speaking may read a written devotion or an excerpt from their own work. Classes may also plan chapels to sum up their thematic units or to celebrate special occasions. Guest speakers may need reminders to address special needs in the school—and to keep things short, especially with younger children.

The Bible rejects a dichotomy between sacred and secular activities. In Bible times, even the cooking pots and the bells of the horses were to be holy to the Lord (Zechariah 14:20–21)! If a school emphasizes mainly the need to get good grades but forgets to study the Bible or praise God in word and song in its classrooms, it lacks full spirituality. However, if we pray a lot but are indifferent to applying the guidelines of Scripture to structure classrooms and plan curriculum, we also lack full spirituality. If we worship God in devotions and chapel but our worship does not penetrate our teaching and learning in the classroom, our school lacks the holiness that God demands.

Spirituality must be an integral part of our curriculum. We need to explore life's big questions with our students (Van Brummelen, Koole, and Franklin 2004):

- Who am I? What is the purpose and meaning of my life? How can I experience fulfillment?
- What should I believe? How do I know that God exists? What is my relationship with God?
- How do I deal with loneliness, suffering, and death? What happens after death? How does that affect how I learn and live?
- How should we live together? How can I connect meaningfully with others? What values should bind us together? How can we build a more compassionate, peaceful, and just world?
- What is the origin of the world? What is the meaning of creation for my life?

As teachers we ask such questions to awaken students' consciousness about the purpose and meaning of life. We want them to think about what was, what is, and what might be, whether that involves ethical issues, justice, suffering, violence, poverty, or ecological challenges. We explore such questions not just in Bible study but also in literature, social studies, and science. In literature we discuss what is good or evil and the source of morality, values, and worldviews. In social studies we consider how ideals and beliefs have influenced cultural development.



Word alert

Spirituality is "the developing relationship of the individual, within community and tradition, to that which is—or is perceived to be—of ultimate concern, ultimate value and ultimate truth" (Wright 1998, 88). Spirituality encompasses, but is broader than, religion. It aims to illumine life's meaning and larger purpose, putting humans in touch with the "beyond" of everyday existence.

Education anchored in spirituality rejects the modernist approach to education that is performance oriented but neglects the human quest for faith, values, and the transcendent. It also rejects the postmodern notion that there is no universal truth and that no ultimate values are essential for society to flourish. Rather, education must connect students with their deepest selves as they explore how faith has answers for the larger questions of human life in an awe-inspiring cosmos.

In science we investigate how God created each species of animal and plant to fit a certain niche and how we can unfold His creation because we can depend on His created order and its scientific laws.

Spirituality and holiness are direct results of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Spirituality depends on commitment and trust in God, and on faith, hope, and love. We cannot force spiritual commitment onto our students. But schools can provide an atmosphere that encourages faith commitment and a deep sense of spirituality. They can model a spiritual lifestyle and nurture spiritual maturity. Spirituality must not be an "add-on" that provides a Christian veneer. Rather, spirituality ought to direct, pervade, and support everything that is planned in a Christian school. That includes its policies, its learning structures and activities, and its efforts to foster moral, emotional, and social development. Only then will a school be a true learning community where teachers and students learn to walk with God.

Reflect and respond 8-2

Revisit the goals of Christian schooling outlined in chapter 1. Do these goals reflect the claim of this section that spirituality ought to direct, pervade, and support everything that is planned in a Christian school? Why or why not?