

CREATING A STICKY SCHOOL

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Note: This article has been prepared from an audio recording.

Every school wants to see inquiries become applicants who become enrollees and re-enrollees. We want to move parents from liking us to loving us, to partner and produce with us. A classical and Christian education is the best possible education not because of our test scores, our websites, or our effective administrative or marketing strategies. A classical and Christian education is the best because it is transformative in its nature and connects the child, as a whole person and a unique image bearer to the person of Jesus Christ in the context of a community of other image bearers and believers. Students are disciplined, mentored, and encouraged on a journey that leads them towards transformation through the work of the Holy Spirit. This article addresses how to make the transformative nature of our paradigm the very thing that makes your school “sticky” (hard to leave).

CIRCUMSTANCES

When considered rightly, every circumstance and conflict, academic concern and parent conference becomes—rather than an interruption—a means to our goal: transformation. The primary difference of a classical education is that we view curriculum as a means to an end. That end is transformation into the likeness of Christ. This transformation is also accomplished through our circumstances; our perspective is biblical. This perspective changes our focus from bemoaning to ministering. Ministering to our families, speaking the truth in love, believing that God has placed both them and us in a relationship brings each of us to a greater understanding of His grace. Paul Tripp often reminds us that our greatest problem is not the circumstances we find ourselves in, it is our hearts. The very challenges that concern us are opportunities for redemption individually and culturally. I believe that the key component in creating a sticky school is the key mission

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of every believer: to become Rescue Ambassadors as we encounter our circumstances.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (II Cor. 5:20)

If we see our purpose as ambassadors of rescue in pursuit of redemptive opportunities, then the hardest aspect of our school life (conflict and circumstances) becomes the most reflective of God's grace. The parts of our job that have the greatest potential for shame and embarrassment and pain will become the greatest areas for beauty and truth and goodness to be revealed. Isn't this the way of the cross? If we move towards those who are struggling, then we will demonstrate that ultimately we are about seeking a transformation in our students and their families. Every school seeks to educate. Few schools are working toward transformation. That gives your school stickiness.

IMAGO DEI

The words, "Let us make man in our own image" were spoken in the context of the ancient Near East, where images of royalty were prominently displayed throughout a kingdom and told the subjects who to fear and who to follow. What were the original hearers of those words thinking about this concept? Hebrew slaves were being told that they were royal image bearers representing the King of kings. Humble Hebrew slaves were mirrors of God to the world. A robust understanding of *imago Dei* is the stickiest thing your school can provide for your students. This is what gives us the ability to relate, and learn and love. We're living in a culture where people don't know who they are. Finding out that you are an image bearer, when you've been told you're a cosmic accident means that you have hope and potential. Learning that God's desire is to transform you even more into the image of His Son is overwhelmingly

hopeful. Making the significance of *imago Dei* one of the foundations of your school's culture will create more stick than any marketing plan you could dream of.

CURRICULUM

A classical education is one that is fully integrated. It matches development, design, and dignity as students walk the course or curriculum that schools set. Curriculum is the means by which you disciple your students in how to think biblically and how to move towards wisdom and virtue. Curriculum is connecting your students with their identity in Christ and how truth, goodness, and beauty reflect Him even if written by an unbelieving author. If your students are learning that their life experience can be exponentially increased by reading great books, then your curriculum is in pretty good shape. If your students are loving to learn while at the same time being challenged to work diligently and faithfully as unto the Lord, then your curriculum is accomplishing its greatest purpose which is to produce awe and wonder, the fear of the Lord. If you're doing this, your school is developing stickiness because almost no one else is. But curriculum is only one aspect of your school. Hopefully you are offering so much more.

COMMUNITY

We are made in the image of the Triune God: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity exists in complete unity, harmony, and fellowship at all times. There is submission and love and honor. This is the model for how we are to relate to one another. When God made Adam, He said that it was not good that Adam was alone. This was not merely marital concern. It was a community concern. It is not good for humans to be alone. We were made for community. We function best when we are in community. Returning to the mirror analogy, what happens when you put two mirrors face to face? The reflections are multiplied and the light is magnified. This is what our communities are supposed

to be accomplishing. Teach this to your students of all ages. Teach them every single aspect of what this means and your school's stickiness will grow. Teach them that they were made for community because they were made to speak truth into each other's lives. Teach them how to encourage one another, bring the best out in each other, respect one another, not merely because they should as part of your code of conduct but because it is part of their royal identity. This is powerfully sticky stuff.

CULTURE

Teaching students how to serve one another in love is also an aspect of this. Our older students serve our younger students in several ways. For example, they spend 15 minutes each day serving the school doing various necessary tasks throughout the campus. The little ones see this. They also see these students come out during their break to have recess with them. We encourage the older students to care for and love the little ones, looking for those who are isolated and giving them instant fame because an upper school student played with them. For both sets of students, this is the highlight of their day. Redemptive relating as a pillar of school culture is transformative and inherently sticky. Do it for the gospel and you will very likely get enrollment thrown in as well. As we embody the heart of Jesus to others, we will have the privilege of watching God use all things to transform us and keep us together in community.

INTERPRETING OUR OWN HEARTS

God's Word tells us that He ordered our days and determined the good works we are to do before the world began. He is most concerned about our hearts and He uses the circumstances of our days to peel back the busyness and reveal to us where our hearts are, what our hearts worship. The Bible uses the word heart to refer

to our inner life, our thoughts, our motives, our ruling desires. How we respond to our circumstances tells us what's going on in our hearts.

Are you, as a school, attentive and aware of this? Do you, as a faculty, observe how your students respond so that you can see what rules them? And are you attentive about your own responses? Do you know what rules you? Are you able to see the ways that others need to help you be transformed into Christ's likeness? I submit to you that the big picture of our lives is for our hearts to be exposed through circumstantial community interactions. We were made to be instruments of grace in each other's lives. Have you ever tried to look at yourself without a mirror? You can't see yourself. In the same way, you can't see your own heart. You need another person to reflect it to you. That is the point of community. Teach your students how their hearts are being revealed through their responses to circumstances. Keep their parents in the loop and be ready when they ask you for advice about what to do to shepherd their child's heart to follow Jesus. Parents are looking for your help and your perspective. This is not the time to run; it's the time to rescue. Yes, I know it's hard (that's why they need to be rescued). Few schools are doing this kind of redemptive relating. This is why they will stick with you.

CONFLICT

Our students aren't going to one day live in community; they are living in community now. We should be teaching them how to live in community as part of discipleship. What does it look like to teach students how to live in community as they experience conflict? It means that we teach them how to resolve conflict biblically, not just by quoting Matthew 18 but by incarnating the most important part of that chapter, "behold, I am there with you." Walking with students of all ages through the process of lovingly confronting, confessing, and forgiving one another is one aspect of community.

Parents often decide to look into other schools because they believe that Johnny is not fitting in, successful, happy, appreciated, respected, or loved. Are you doing all you can to cast a vision for those families? How is God using Johnny's situation to work on the hearts of His people? Are you taking advantage of the teachable moments of conflict to help them become better equipped to support your mission and shepherd their child's heart? Or do you hold the door for them as they leave?

If you learn nothing else from this article, please learn these four words: run, cover, hide, and blame. No matter what culture, language, or time period, this is how humans react when their sinful hearts are exposed. This is what Adam did in Genesis 3 in his four attempts to cover, minimize, and avoid the truth. When you see others doing these four things, your calling at that point is to move towards them in love, (as God did with Adam)

believing that God has an agenda for this person's heart, that this circumstance is revealing it, and you are His representative image bearer. You and I are all guilty of being ruled by our desires. We have needed others to speak the truth to us in love. It is the mercy of God that reveals that to us and He is seeking to use us to be His ambassadors in the lives of our parents, students, and teachers. He desires to use them as ambassadors, too. As you disciple them relationally, they will do the same for others. Ambassadors are very sticky people.

How do we create a sticky school? Relationally connect with parents in such a way as to move them from liking to loving to partner and produce. How do we create a school that no one wants to leave? Connect students and their families to their identity in Christ through culture, curriculum, and community as you experience circumstances together.

DID YOU KNOW?



AS AN ACCS MEMBER, YOU RECEIVE THESE (AND OTHER) BENEFITS

- Access to school enrollment marketing webinars
- Document exchange with other member schools
- Custom listing on the Google map on our website to help prospective parents find your school
- Reduced registration rate for the annual conference