

Communicating Your Value with Parents

by David Goodwin, *The Ambrose School*

“What’s your class size?” “Do you have sports?” “Are your teachers credentialed?” “Where do your graduates go to college?” Headmasters hear at least one of these questions with nearly every prospective parent visit. These questions reveal two things. First, parents typically value things that have little to do with true education (with the possible exception of class size). Secondly, parents see education as a general commodity, differing in small ways, but generally consisting of a processing system that results in children who possess the skills necessary to enter college.

When we express the value of the Trivium, Latin, or the Great Books to parents, it often falls on deaf ears. Most parents fail to see our values because they don’t come to our schools looking for them. They come looking for the values that our culture says education should be. Our challenge: we need to change the core values of our families regarding education before they will truly appreciate our schools. This is not an easy task.

In six years of meeting with prospective families, I’ve gained a general perspective on our community. You need to know your own community, because it’s probably not like ours. Our city is “the heartland meets California casual.” Mostly white, non-denominational Bible church families dominate our county (excepting the 20% Mormon families). Youth sport teams are among the largest in the nation. We’re one big suburb. We’re not in the Bible Belt, but you can see a casual form of it not far

from here. In this environment, evangelical Christians are content to raise their families as “normal Americans.” Here, possibly more than in most regions, the American *paideia* reigns. What is the problem? The American *paideia* was not conceived of by Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, or John Adams, or even the Puritans. It was popularized by the early twentieth-century progressives. This means that our parent’s idyllic view of school, with its pom-pom-waving cheerleaders, guys in letterman sweaters, and lockers in the hallway adorned with dome pendant lights, is indelibly etched in the vernacular consciousness of each of us.

Most ACCS schools struggle to reach a sustainable class size in their grammar school for about four or five years after they open. Then, word-of-mouth and reputation take over. K–4 generally holds steady, with close to capacity in the upper elementary. Grades seven and eight begin to erode and by ninth grade, when schools are typically in their sixth to tenth year of operation, the high school struggles with a handful of students. Parents leave as their values change. How do we respond? Typically, we scramble to add sports and electives, we hold meetings with eighth grade parents, and we become frustrated when families drift away over time.

To accomplish this growth, even in a down economy, we’ve depended on using every asset we have to communicate our value to parents.

Crass Values

Families come to the school

when they perceive the value exceeds the cost. Families leave because their values change, or the school’s value declines. The crass business model is simple: if the total perceived value by the customer (parent) is greater than the cost (dollars + hassle), then the family stays. If not, they may hold on for a while, paying more than they perceive to be getting (grumbling). In business lingo, this is referred to as the switching cost. It means that any change is a hassle, so people tend to stay with businesses that stop serving their needs—for a while. But this is just a tinder box waiting for a spark to motivate a move.

In theory, the business of running a school is simple: provide strong value (be sure you have a quality product). Communicate that value in a way that parents can perceive it. And finally, and most importantly, build a relationship with parents over time that deepens their appreciation of the value offered by classical Christian education. All the while, keep an eye on hassles that will negatively affect the value equation.

A note on hassles: often, we overlook the parent as we make policies. For example, if you set your start time later in the morning, it may be preferable for learning but there may be a trade-off for parents when dads can’t drop the kids off on their way to work because it’s too late. Hassles often have more influence than they are due in the grand scheme of things. “But,” an administrator may say, “kids are more ready to learn at 9:00 than at 7:45 in the morning!” This is probably true. But, you need to weigh the hassle for parents. Maybe you want only the most dedicated parents at your school, and drop-off should not be

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set for dad's convenience. This is fine. Just recognize that it will affect your enrollment. You may miss a chance to grow a family toward a strong commitment to classical education if you don't keep them past the first year. (No need to write me about start times. This was only a hypothetical example. There are solid reasons to go either way.)

Understanding Parent Values in the Grammar School

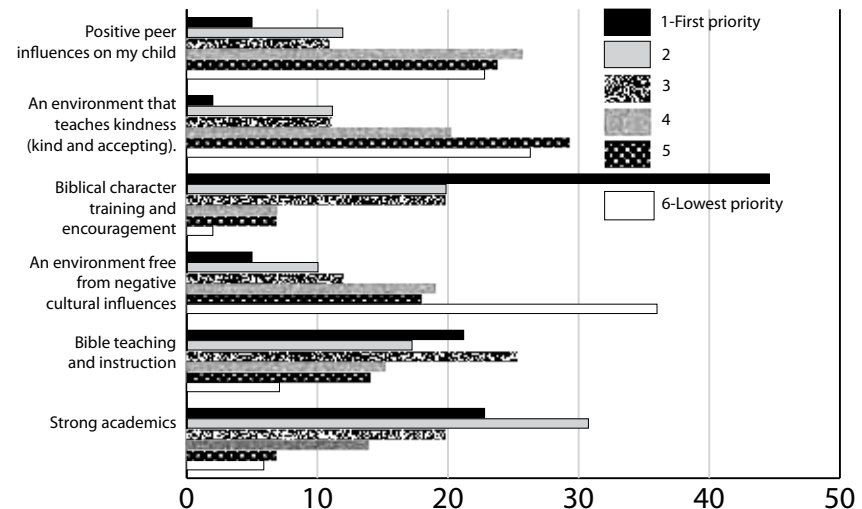
Parents choose a school, and then over time things change. When you think about it, how many businesses do you pay monthly for 13 years? In grammar school, parents value biblical character training and strong academics with a third value pool on Bible teaching. So, when formulating messages to parents you should create a distinctive value for your school using one of these values. For example, *"What does the Bible teach us about art? In Mrs. Greif's art class, students consider others before themselves. They create with the purpose of inspiring others, rather than focusing on self-expression. This means they learn the skilled craft of good painting before they are turned loose to create."* In this way, you tie a parent value (Bible teaching) to a very distinct attribute of classical education.

One problem with communicating the value of classical Christian education is that we're swimming in a different kind of stream. We're looking through different glasses. Or we're working from a different meta-narrative. Pick your analogy. The bottom line is we often have to build value where none exists in the mind of the parent. To do this, we must cast the value through a value they already have. Clearly,

parents value biblical character development. Do a parenting class on "Obey Right Away," "Love Your Neighbor," or "Love What

Strong academics is a high value for parents. More specifically, they want their children to be challenged and well-rounded more

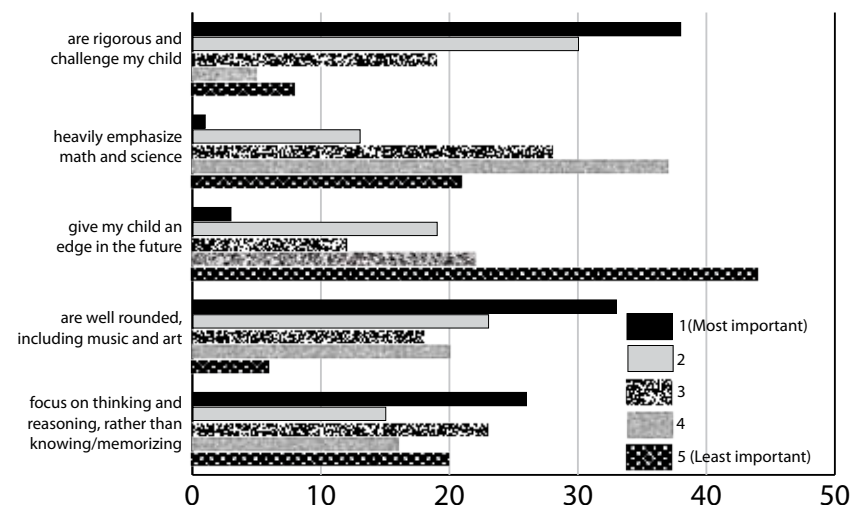
When considering a grammar school (K–6) for your child, which of the following do you want? (Please rank)



God Loves—Love the Standard.” (see Matt Whitling’s “Sins of the Classroom”).¹ Training like this is generally appreciated by parents and it begins to build equity. You need value equity to hold on to students.

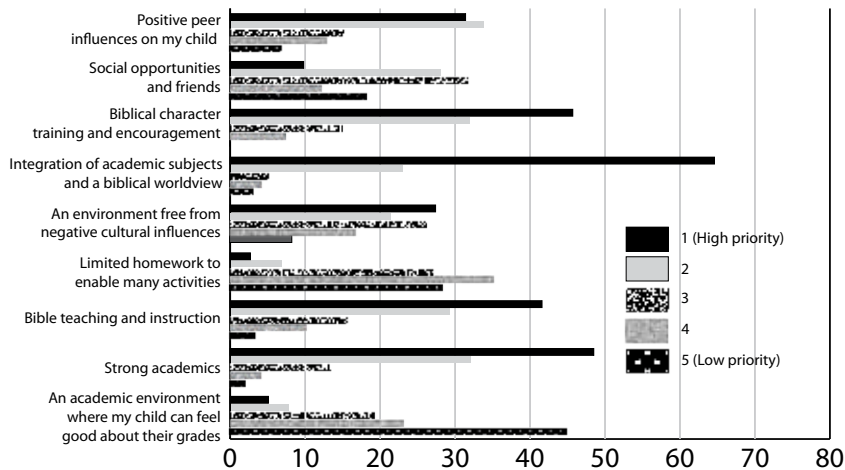
than they want math, science, or an edge in the future. Grammar school parents resonate with a focus on thinking rather than knowing or memorizing. Given the grammar-stage emphasis on memorization, this is an area

When considering a grammar school (K–6) for your child, what do you want academically? (Rank) I want academics that . . .



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When considering a high school for your child, which of the following do you want? (If you have younger children, please answer for what you want in a high school when the time comes.)



where we need to be careful in communicating with parents. Often, messaging grammar-stage education involves words like “poll parrot” or “recitation.” However, parents value thinking and reasoning in these stages. We’ve begun to replace words like recitation or chant to describe what we do in grammar school. Instead, we emphasize knowledge that will prepare students for thinking and reasoning in the secondary.

Cultivating Parent Affections

Often, once we have families in our schools, we stop marketing to them. More classically put, we should be cultivating the parent’s affections. To summarize Aristotle, our normal affections must be cultivated to a higher form because we do not naturally love what is true, good, and beautiful. With parents, we must continually till the soil of their worldview to appreciate and love classical Christian education.

Cultivating values is a problematic process because

value moves over time. It’s also difficult because our paradigm is so different that it takes years to fully see our value for most people. One part of the value equation is to continually communicate with parents to build value equity (I sometimes call it “the bank”). Here are a few of the ideas

we have used to fill the bank:

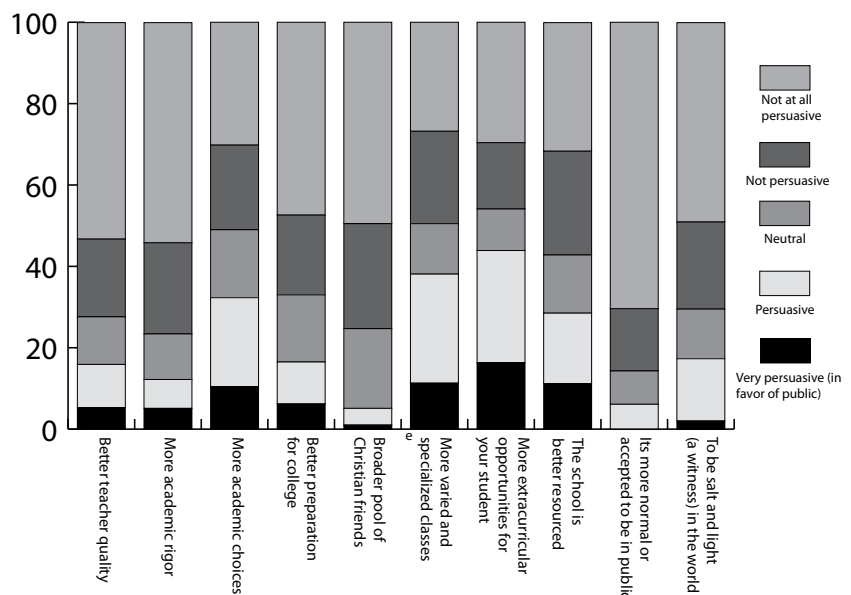
1. Publish a regular (quarterly, as a suggestion) newsletter that you mail out. In it, connect what’s going on at your school with a principle from classical methodology.

2. Create a collection of articles that describe classical Christian education. The articles should be three or four pages. We use passages from “The Great Tradition” (ISI)², C.S. Lewis’ “Screwtape Proposes a Toast,”³ and articles from other publications. We compile them into a single booklet called “Nightstand Articles” and pass it to parents every year.

3. We distribute “Discover Classical Christian Education—You’ll Wish You Could Go Back to School”⁴ to parents, new and existing.

4. Regularly send emails from the headmaster describing what he has been working on in the past week. I always start with associating my work with the philosophy of classical education. Important: my headmaster’s

Thinking of high schools for your children, which of the following statements represent a persuasive reason to place your student in a public/charter/general school.



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notes always or usually start with a school event or a current event. This helps parents see the application of classical Christian thought to the real world.

5. Hold practical classes in parenting and the classics in parenting to develop a core of bought-in families.

All of these things, when regularly kept up, provide an ongoing equity with families. Equity builds value, which helps when the equation begins to shift in the secondary. But these things alone will not be enough. The culture of the school needs to constantly reinforce the values of the school. Student retention in the secondary is often as much about the student as the parent. So, you need to communicate value to them as well.

Typically, secondary students begin to influence their parents around the seventh grade. The very thing we promote (the logic phase) at this age can work against us. Students figure out they can have an opinion, and exert influence upon their parents. To retain students, schools should pay as much attention to the students' experience as they do to the parents' experience. Communicating value with students may take more than words.

While there's much more to be said, the central theme is *paideia*. We're not selling soap. We're selling a product that transforms the mind. To do so, we must first transform the way our buyers think. To do that, we must first understand how they think. If you don't already, I suggest that you regularly spend at least an hour with every new family talking about your value and what they value. This will help build an experience on which you can

build. The research included here may help some, but it's just a beginning. Winning the value equation requires that we use terminology that parents understand, connect classical Christian education values with values parents already have, and communicate unceasingly.

NOTES

1. Matt Whitling, "Sins of the Classroom," is available at <https://www.accsedu.org/ConferenceRecordings.ihtml?id=441761>.

2. Richard M. Gamble, ed., *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to*

Be an Educated Human Body (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2009).

3. C.S. Lewis "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," in *The Screwtape Letters*.

4. "Discover Classical Christian Education" published by the Ambrose Group can be viewed at http://www.theambrosegroupp.org/Parent_essentials.htm.



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