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Education for what? An essential question amidst the COVID-19 crisis from an American perspective

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Education for what?

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown many schools around the country into turbulent waters. In a short period of time, many K – 12 Christian schools had to transition into the alternate universe known as virtual learning. Many educators have probably dabbled in virtual learning elements as a supplement to their normal pedagogical practice. Ironically, the challenges and questions with which many schools were immediately concerned were perpetually at the doors of many schools, not just Christian schools.

As a new secondary principal charged with leading a faculty into uncharted, virtual waters, I found it interesting that many of the most pressing concerns were the same concerns we had been discussing throughout the year. The challenges of online learning vary from challenges of face-to-face learning in degree, not in kind. For example, while we were wrestling with the best ways to keep learning virtually, we had already been investigating together what “learning” means. As we tried to solve the problem regarding virtual assessments, we had already been investigating the pitfalls of traditional, standard assessments while turning our attention to a variety of authentic assessments, such as a portfolio assessment of a student’s best work. We were concerned with how to engage our students at a distance as if we had already solved the problem with student engagement when we are face-to-face (I assure you, we have not). We are wading through other challenges as well, but the central point is this: the COVID-19 pandemic did not usher in new issues for educators to wrestle with; rather, the pandemic brought to the surface questions which educators must perpetually wrestle.

Of all the important questions demanding answers, there is one question that demands constant engagement. To what ends are we educating our students? This question is not only

central for primary and secondary Christian schools, but for Christian colleges and universities (Dockery, 2019). The question of mission is the most important question schools must answer (and keep answering). While schools wrestle with issues such as equitable access to technology, delivery of resources, changing family structures, possible economic hardship, instructional delivery platforms, and means of assessment, just to name a few, it is possible the mission of the school is pushed to the back burner. It is perilous to ignore a school’s *raison d’être* at the precise time such clarity and focus is paramount.

What works for what?

Yong Zhao (2020) recently wrote about the essential question’s that educators must answer as they make decisions about online learning. In his article “Beyond Does it Work,” Zhao asks the following guiding question “What works for what?” I was stopped in my tracks when I read that line. Zhao’s (2020) question raises the central issue which schools should wrestle through the long night of education, much like Jacob wrestled with God (Gen 32). Schools must know “for what” they exist. Only then are schools ready to answer the question, “what works?”

Donavan Graham, in his book *Teaching Redemptively* (2009), wrote, “Education is not an end in itself; it is a means to develop a response to our calling in life.” (p. 49) Education is a means of glorifying Christ (Col. 3:17) and the process by which disciples learn to think and live like Him. Taken holistically, a K-12 Christian education is about leading individuals out from their destructive, deluded, self-centeredness towards the life of wholeness, fellowship, and joy for which man was created. A Christian education seeks to remediate the fallen, sinful condition of man by pointing him to the source of joy and true, eternal life, Jesus. An education that seeks to bring salve to the whole person need not diminish the role of the intellectual life. However, the mission of Christian schools cannot simply be the accumulation of facts.

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There are numerous examples in Scripture and life where an accumulation of facts leads to death (see one context Mt. 23:15). Although worldly, temporary success can be gained by accumulating facts and academic degrees, it is perilous for Christians to forget that no knowledge is profitable if that knowledgeable person misses Christ. As Ecclesiastes teaches us, success without God in Christ is not success. Christian education, then, fulfills its mission when schools encourage students to pursue true success, or as the Old Testament puts it, shalom (peace) with God.

Mission statements for Christian schools likely vary widely from school to school. Answering the “for what” a school exists is a unique but essential task for every institution. In my opinion, one excellent mission statement for any Christian school is articulated by James K.A. Smith. He (2009) wrote, “education is not primarily a heady project concerned with information; rather, education is most fundamentally a matter of formation, a task of shaping and creating a certain kind of people” (p. 26). In the Christian tradition, education plays a seminal role in the holistic formation of disciples, not merely informing a mind. Education, therefore, is not merely about the accumulation of facts, but rather is about cultivating character and forming habits of the mind, body, and soul. The final *telos* (Gr: purpose, end, or goal) towards which Christian education strives is man’s reconciliation with God through Christ. Christian education also seeks to inculcate a life of godliness, wisdom, and simplicity displayed perfectly by Jesus Christ. A clearly defined mission enables more clear answers to pressing questions, whatever they may be.

How might a school with Smith’s (2009) mission statement answer pressing issues about online learning, assessment, and equitable access to resources? If a school exists to create a certain kind of person, then the tools they use and the structure for which the tools are used might look different than, say, a traditional “college-prep school” that pursues “rigorous academic preparation.” Knowing “for what” you exist is as essential for today’s schools as it was for the world’s greatest Teacher, Jesus.

Knowing “for what”

In Luke 4, Jesus had been ministering around the home of Simon’s mother-in-law. One morning, Jesus went to a solitary place while the crowds searched for him. Upon finding him, they implored Jesus to remain with them and continue his work. However, Jesus denied their request. How intriguing! There was good work left to accomplish, but the Son of God chose not to do it. Within this community there were undoubtedly questions people wanted to ask of

Jesus. There were probably personal maladies that could have benefitted from the Physician’s hand. Yet, the Teacher ended his lesson and moved on. Why? Why not capitalize on the interest of the people and stay a little longer? The answer is simple. Jesus knew “for what” he came. When pressed to stay, Jesus said, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” (Lk. 4:43, NIV)

Jesus’ singular focus on his “for what” enabled him to make mission-oriented decisions despite the abundant opportunities to do good. Zhao’s (2020) article, likewise, mentions many ways schools might employ online learning tools, yet while cautioning the use of good tools for the sake of ease or simplicity. Doing online learning well, or any type of learning for that matter, demands a clearly articulated and communicated mission. The faculty and families of a school need to know the “for what” the school exists. The “for what” of a school will provide the necessary parameters with which to address pressing matters, such as a transition to virtual learning.

While the whole world is focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainties it catalyses, schools continue to educate their students as well as possible. The mission of a school should be the GPS by which the Educational Enterprise sails the storm-tossed sea of uncertainty. With a clear understanding of where a school is going, and “for what” it exists, a school is more effective in deciding which tools, programs, or personnel will work towards that end. As a fellow educator and administrator, I encourage you to keep returning to your mission statement when you are uncertain about the issues you face. Even when the options before us are all good, it is crucial we, like Jesus, are able to say no to good work because we are absolutely convinced what is best for us, namely, that we know “for what” purpose we exist. **TEACH**

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