

What is Your Schools Purpose?

Warren Friesen, Principal, Cariboo Adventist Academy, Williams Lake, BC

Every school has its own little niche and mission to fill. At Cariboo Adventist Academy we have been slowly defining what our mission is in our community. Though many things are important, our most important goal is to introduce students to Christ and encourage a relationship with Him. Nothing should get in the way of or cloud that mission.



One issue that has troubled us as we have established our presence in the community is, "How do we remain a distinctly Adventist school with 65% of our students non-Adventist, and at the same time meet the needs of the community we serve?" We want to be known for more than our stance on pork, alcohol, and the day we go to church. First and foremost we want to be known as "The school where they know Jesus." How do we get to that? How do we show the community that, yes, we do love Jesus?

The following are some things that are working for us and I hope that some of them might be useful for other schools trying to establish their Christian mission in their community.

The first and most obvious move was to spend a lot of time praying about our school. Everyone was involved in this, staff, parents, students, and churches.

Next, we began to develop a plan that made our school student centered instead of rule centered. To say that we just came up with a plan and it was implemented and successful would be nice, but it did not work that way. The process was and still is evolutionary, and I imagine it will continue to be so. By saying student centered we mean making the students feel that they, the students, are the reason the school and its rules exist. While we needed rules to run smoothly, we did not want students feeling like they were passing through a tight airport security system to get into the school in the morning. We also did not want them feeling that we were continually spying on them trying to catch them doing something wrong.

Our big dilemma of course was how could we have a smooth running orderly school, without spending a

large portion of our time focusing on and enforcing the rules.

To help out our students we made rules that are simple and logical. Though some of them are not popular with all the students, they and their parents understand the reasons for them and can agree with their intent. We spent a lot of time making our rulebook as simple and easy to understand as possible. Some of the big thick rulebooks we had in the past were seldom read or remembered.

Next, each rule that was tied to religious beliefs and traditions of our church was closely analyzed to make sure that it could be supported with the Bible. It is very difficult to explain to Adventist and non-Adventist students alike, religious reasons for rules that are based on standards and traditions from many years ago, when there is no conclusive Biblical support for them. If the only reason we could give for a rule was, "Our church does not believe in _____?", then that was not good enough for us. We wanted to speak positively about our church not blame it for things we could not explain.

We spend quite a bit of time looking at the direction students lives are headed. As students approach junior high and high school age, they make important choices about the direction their spiritual and moral lives are headed. Some students may be struggling with some big issues like family problems or even substance abuse, but still have a sincere desire to be in our school. With proper counseling and support, these students can be successful and may make significant contributions to the spiritual tone of our school. On the other hand, there have been some students who come from good Adventist homes and appear to have no difficulties or problems, but have no desire to be here and are undermining the spiritual mission and intent of the school. Students who do not want to be in our school are encouraged to find education elsewhere.

We try to treat our students reasonably and fairly. We treat them the way we would like to be treated. This requires that our staff and administration be alert and sensitive to what is going on in our students' lives. It also requires that our school board and churches be compassionate and supportive. We have found that while we must follow the spirit of the rules when dealing with student problems, we need to give ourselves room to maneuver to meet individual student needs.

Finally and importantly, we spend a lot of time listening. We have tried to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable discussing issues and concerns with the principal and teachers. Everyone needs to be heard, and even if there is no way to change a rule or situation, students feel better if they know that their concerns are taken seriously and that they can talk in confidence to someone.

This is just a little bit of our basic philosophy and so far it has worked well in our community. We don't know how it will turn out because the whole philosophy is still evolving. What we know though, is that our school wants to introduce our students to Jesus Christ and promote a healthy relationship with Him. We are doing our best to get rid of any obstacles that get in the way of that mission.