



MULTIPLE CHOICE:
**HOW PARENTS
SORT EDUCATION
OPTIONS IN A
CHANGING MARKET**

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“ONE MISSION UNDER GOD... INDIVISIBLE?”: CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

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We believe Christian schools build generations of spiritually grounded, academically empowered young people who make a difference in our world. Barna’s findings in this report reveal that families are seeking Christian schools with these outcomes in mind for their children. The findings also confirm that ACSI schools are having a significant impact on a new generation of students and families.

This is valuable market information for Christian schools, especially with regard to Millennial parents. But the data also show a correlating alignment with the evangelical church’s mission to make disciples. Surprisingly, however, few pastors endorse Christian education as part of parents’ school choice process. This is a significant area of opportunity for Christian schools.

It is helpful to look at the factors that are important to parents who have chosen to enroll their children at an ACSI school alongside their ratings of how well the schools have actually performed in those areas.

Four of the top factors listed by parents who chose an ACSI school are related to matters of faith and values, spiritual formation, character development and other relationship-based dynamics. Factors in school choice include:

- Developing character: 94 percent are looking for a school that is intentional about developing character
- Community: 84 percent are looking for a school community that aligns with their beliefs
- Spiritual formation: 82 percent prefer a school that is intentional about spiritual formation
- Teachers: 98 percent value a faculty that cares about students and is accessible

Academics are also highly rated (95%), but the majority of influencing factors center on the aspects listed above. Similarly, parent goals for education include developing a love for God and people, strong

values, faithfulness, wisdom, obedience to God and leadership. Isn't it interesting that parent goals for their children's education and the goals of good disciple-making are congruent?

The ratings given by parents after their experience at an ACSI school demonstrate that schools typically meet or exceed parent expectations on nearly every critical factor. Actual satisfaction ratings from ACSI parents are:

- Developing character: 91%
- Community: 91%
- Spiritual formation: 94%
- Teachers: 92%

Families find ACSI schools to be exactly what they were hoping for!

Until late in the 20th century, teachings of invaluable biblical truth were recognized and embedded in the very foundation of our country's educational system. But who can argue today that those same values have been, and continue to be, steadily challenged by the spread of secular thought and a culture in moral decline?

In the '60s (when our school was founded) and well into the '70s, church leaders and congregations saw a world threatened by Cold War, civil unrest, political instability and even the threat of nuclear annihilation. The Christian school movement, sponsored mainly by churches, exploded across the country because church leaders believed our children needed to be fully prepared for the uncertain world they would inherit. During that same season, the ACSI movement, composed of church leaders, pastors and educators, advanced the cause of Christian education to establish its vital place in society.

Sadly, the strong bond that once linked Christian education, churches and the broader Christian community together in a shared calling looks very different today.

Ideas and Questions

1. How can we grow stronger together?
2. Would academic research looking at pastors' attitudes and perceptions about Christian schools (similar to the Barna research about parent perceptions) be helpful to ascertain? For instance, what do church leaders believe is the quality of our academic programs and the effectiveness of our Christian distinctives? Are there differences in attitudes/perceptions and support from pastors who have their own children enrolled in a Christian school vs. pastors who do not?
3. What are ways to initiate dialogue and build stronger relationships with pastors/church leaders who serve communities in shared areas of influence?
4. How can Christian school administrators be proactive to include church and pastor networking in our enrollment strategies?
5. As Christian school leaders how can we help enlighten or re-familiarize pastors and church leaders about our similar mission?
6. How can Christian school administrators make the data/findings available to church leaders about the positive dimensions and outcomes of Christian education?
7. Independent Christian schools are currently being scrutinized in efforts to categorize them as schools, rather than faith-based ministries deserving of constitutional protection. Should they consider developing an affiliation with a church ministry in the days ahead to provide better protection for their religious liberty?
8. How many new Christian schools are opening each year and who is championing these efforts? Is the church taking the initiative or is it concerned citizens and business leaders?
9. Are there more things we can be doing in collaboration given the increasing legislative hostility toward the church and its first amendment rights?

When parents were asked if “the opinions or experiences of church leaders influenced their choice of school” (religious vs. public) only 9 percent of parents acknowledge pastors playing a part in their decision. The disconnect here is puzzling. Like the pull of the moon on the ocean’s tide, the Church has always had an “action-reaction” relationship with culture. As trends develop and society changes, especially away from biblical morals, the Church has always responded to stem the cultural undertow and equip believers to live a biblical lifestyle.

But there has been a steady and gradual distancing between churches and Christian schools. Why? If not the whole community of believers, who will stand in the gap and advocate for Christian education for such a time as this?

From a pulpit perspective, ACSI founding president Paul Kienel describes the weekly dilemma a pastor faces: “On any given Sunday, there are Christian school educators and public school educators in almost every service. If the pastor speaks out in support of either group, he risks offending the other.”

A pastor who seeks to relate to his or her congregation as a unified family might find tension in referencing Christian schooling versus public education. That said, one must agree that scripture doesn’t make a case for children being taught by non-believing teachers, but rather those who view biblical truth in a manner compatible with the child’s parents.

So what could this imply for the relationship between the priorities of a church and a Christian school? Dr. Kienel sees it this way: “Both institutions are essential to the spiritual and intellectual well-being of future church members and the greater Christian community.”

The effectiveness of private Christian schools on this front—that is, Christian school graduates becoming responsible church members—is clearly supported by the Cardus Education Survey: Private Schools for the Public Good (2014). The longitudinal study demonstrates that the Christian school’s mission (and its effectiveness) is in clear alignment with the mission of evangelical churches.

The findings from Cardus and Barna should be incredibly encouraging to Christian school administrators. The mission of Christian schools is being fulfilled, and one key benefactor is the Church. Christian schools have a great story to tell—but we need to do a better job telling it.

The Barna findings should serve to motivate serious reflection by school and church leaders alike. Christian school leaders must take a proactive approach to initiate conversations with local pastors. It’s not just about providing talking points; we must create venues for dialogue and relationship-building. Hosting a luncheon on campus for area pastors could be helpful. Or consider offering to speak at the local ministerial association.

ASCI President Dan Egeler emphasizes the role of ACSI as a convener, not a container. Perhaps school administrators can take a similar approach to church leaders, bringing companion ministries together in order to better function as the “Church beyond the walls.” Our missions are aligned. Now we must strengthen the partnerships that can fulfill the mission.



ABOUT...

ABOUT ACSI

The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) is the largest Protestant educational organization in the world. Since 1978, ACSI has advanced excellence in Christian schools by enhancing the professional and personal development of Christian educators and providing support functions for Christian schools. Those functions include teacher and administrator certification, school accreditation, professional development, legal/legislative support, and textbook publishing.

ACSI member schools serve more than 5.5 million students worldwide. Along with a headquarters facility, ACSI has 25 offices in North America and around the globe. Nearly 24,000* schools from over 100 countries are members of the association.

www.acsi.org

*Includes 19,000 associate members in the Democratic Republic of Congo

ABOUT BARNAL

Barna Group is a research firm dedicated to providing actionable insights on faith and culture, with a particular focus on the Christian church. In its 32-year history, Barna Group has conducted more than one million interviews in the course of hundreds of studies, and has become a go-to source for organizations that want to better understand a complex and changing world from a faith perspective. Barna's clients include a broad range of academic institutions, churches, non-profits and businesses, such as Alpha, the Templeton Foundation, Pepperdine University, Fuller Seminary, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Maclellan Foundation, DreamWorks Animation, Focus Features, Habitat for Humanity, the Navigators, NBC-Universal, the ONE Campaign, Paramount Pictures, the Salvation Army, Walden Media, Sony and World Vision. The firm's studies are frequently quoted by major media outlets such as The Economist, BBC, CNN, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, Fox News, Huffington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times.

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