Students and School Culture
Toward a Christ-Centered Student Community
By Ryan Evans

If you had to take a quick pulse of the student culture at your school, where would you start? Here are several questions for a quick assessment: Do students act a certain way in class, and carry themselves completely differently in the hallways and at recess? During field trips do observers see your students as paragons of politeness and respect? Do

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older students know the names of the younger students (do they even see each other during the day)? Do your athletic teams routinely win sportsmanship awards? Are new students warmly embraced? Does a sense of godly joy pervade student interactions?

Functional Communities

Stephen Vryhof writes about healthy school cultures in his book, *Between Memory and Vision: The Case for Faith-Based Schooling.* The ideal culture, says Vryhof, is rooted in what he calls "functional community," that is, "a shared understanding of what the world is about, what is important, and how the group should live…"[1] A prerequisite to a Christ-like student culture is an environment where

a common vision is shared by parents, faculty, staff, and board.

Perhaps the single most important contributor to the student culture is the school's admission policy. Is your school mission to educate and disciple students solely from Christian families, or does it include evangelizing those outside of the faith? Either can be a faithful mission, but will have radical effects on student culture. In a functional community students are taught a common language, and they more easily adapt to school standards rooted in God's Word. Unbelieving students in a school with an evangelistic mission may outwardly still follow the rules, but the effects on the "hidden curriculum" can be drastic (Galatians 5:7-9).

In Pursuit of Character: Toward a Christ-Centered Student Culture

Are academics and college placement the top priority, or does the school communicate that character and virtue are equally important to G.P.A.? What does your typical graduate look like? Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We

must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education." Academic excellence ought to be central to our mission in classical Christian schools, but it is only part of the manifestation of Christ-like character.

In *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education*, Al Greene writes, "A love that is able to empathize with another's problem or pain, a compassion that recoils from the temptation to make cutting or belittling remarks, a willingness to help those in need—these are the qualities that make up true community."[2] Because it's easy for students at rigorous schools to tacitly assume that grades trump character, we must work to promote and actively recognize virtue in our students.

A list of programs is no recipe for an organic godly student culture. Certainly grace, repentance, and forgiveness must permeate our hallways, for we all fall short of perfection. Yet despite our fallen natures, below are some ideas to help move away from a self-serving, hypocritical student culture toward one that is Christ centered and stewardship-oriented.

The Older Shall Serve the Younger

The goal in a K-12 setting should be harmonious interaction between the little ones and the older ones. When older students greet younger ones in the morning with a warm smile and a hug, it's a sign of a healthy student culture. Some ideas:

• A reading buddies program not only enhances reading skills

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for younger students, but offers the opportunity for some of the younger secondary students to minister to the little ones.

• Gathering together in all-school assemblies preserves a sense of solidarity, promotes fellowship across grade levels, and builds community.

• We have older students serve hot lunch to the younger ones on a weekly basis, or help carry the younger ones around in wheelbarrows during our annual jog-a-thon.

• Even facilities are important—a shared building helps students mingle and live together, allowing older students to greet the younger ones by name in the morning, to give them a hug, or just an encouraging smile (Matthew 10:42).

Acknowledge Virtue Throughout the Curriculum

Faculty and staff must promote unity and compassion, and not tolerate students treating or speaking to one another unkindly. Anytime a teacher allows disrespect he condones and encourages students to continue in it. Ideas to consider:

• Teach biblically-centered gender differences. Having girls go first in line and boys hold doors open for girls helps teach the boys to lead and serve.

• Seek opportunities to acknowledge godly character in students. A highlight at our school is the year-end awards assembly, where we emphasize character, specifically at the secondary level. The Student Character Award is solely a student-nominated award, and each student writes specific comments about their nominees to be read at the assembly. Six to eight students are commended and students' comments about their character are

read to the whole school. They are called to the front amid enthusiastic applause from students and parents as we all rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15).

• When completing report cards, spend as much time on meaningful comments as you do on grades. Move beyond "Pleasure to have in class" to more meaningful, personal comments regarding a student's character strengths as observed at school.

Building a Healthy Secondary Culture

Manifestations of cultural problems tend to look worse at the secondary level, and it's important to look for ways to promote a sense of counter-cultural ethos. Ideas:

• Protocol is a great way to encourage students to learn how to act as godly young men and women, get to know each other better, and have a great time in an environment absent of a dating culture. (See Sandra Boswell's book *Protocol Matters* for more information).[3]

• A House system at the secondary level, where students are initiated into a group with traditions and student interaction across grades 7-12, allows older students to lead and serve, modeling for the younger ones appropriate, Christ-like behavior.

• Provide opportunities for students in the secondary school to meet in small, gender-specific groups to discuss with a teacher mentor various issues pertaining to godly virtue. Raising the awareness of what a healthy culture looks like helps them to pursue it.

This past year our volleyball coach was unable to host the end-of-season team party. No worries. Without being asked, our two seniors on the team took the role of

setting up the party, giving awards, and demonstrating leadership worthy of true stewards. They did this not to attract attention, but to serve Christ by loving others. As one author writes, "The sublime premise of a classical education asserts that right thinking will lead to right, if not righteous, acting."[4] May the culture of students at our schools adequately reflect this noble and biblical pursuit.

ENDNOTES

[1] Stephen Vryhof, *Between Memory and Vision: The Case for Faith-Based Schooling*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

[2] Albert Greene, *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education*. (Colorado Springs: Purposeful Design Publications, 2003).

[3] Sandra Boswell, *Protocol Matters: Cultivating Social Graces in Christian Homes and Schools* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2006).

[4] David V. Hicks, *Norms and Nobility: A Treatise on Education*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999).