



Formative to Flourishing Framework: Spiritual Formation

By Stephen Dill

The Formative to Flourishing School Framework was developed by ACSI staff to provide a high-level summary of the essential elements of school improvement. *CSE* is continuing the series begun last year on the elements of the framework, and in this issue we are unpacking the components of spiritual formation. We believe that spiritual formation is one of six key categories for Christian school improvement. However, it may be the most difficult element in the framework, because ultimately spiritual formation comes not from human effort, but from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Three Caveats

First, we must recognize that matters of the heart cannot be controlled by school leaders. However, Scripture tells us that it is possible to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19). If human action can quench or grieve the Spirit, it makes sense that school leaders should strive to create school climates that support the work of the Holy Spirit. Although spiritual formation is the work of the Spirit, even the dedicated Calvinist would acknowledge that God uses His people to communicate the gospel and to make disciples. There are Christian school

cultures where the work of the Holy Spirit is palpable and other cultures where the work of the Holy Spirit is stifled.

Secondly, some believers object to the term “spiritual formation” because it is not found in Scripture. Some prefer to use the term “discipleship.” The main point is the reality—not the label—of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. As Paul expressed it, “I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).

Lastly, school culture (or climate) is a very powerful component of effective schools. A common definition states that school climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. There is extensive research that shows that school climate has a profound impact on students' mental and physical health (Thapa, Cohen, Guffy, and Higgins-D'Alessandro 2013). Many Christian school leaders have seen legalistic climates where emphasis is placed on external conformity to rules. Conformity to adult expectations—especially when the adults are watching—can become a game, masking hearts that are far from Christ. Some Christian schools with significant numbers of nonbelieving students or cynical Christian students can develop a school culture that mocks Christianity. On the other hand, a positive Christian school culture greatly respects believers and nonbelievers and has strong, admired spiritual leaders in the student body. Thus, school culture has significant potential impact on the spiritual formation of the student body.

Doesn't spiritual formation belong with the church and the home, not the school? Those immersed in the reformed tradition will cite Abraham Kuyper's concept of "sphere sovereignty" as support for this objection. Multiple theological traditions agree that Scripture gives the primary responsibility for the spiritual development of children to parents (Ephesians 6:4). While the church, as well as the Christian school, can support or encourage spiritual formation, the ultimate responsibility lies with the home. However, wise Christian parents look to the Christian school as an extension of their authority that can help them fulfill this responsibility. And the Christian school can support the spiritual growth of the student from a non-Christian family who comes to Christ.

Some object to a school focus on spiritual formation because of the reality that schools deal with children and teenagers—"works in progress"—and it is unrealistic to expect teenagers to demonstrate adult spiritual maturity. But there is a reason why the "4/14 Window" is getting as much attention in missions today as the "10/40 Window." Researcher George Barna emphasized the importance of children's ministry by contending that lifelong moral views are largely in place by adolescence: according to Barna, "what you believe at age 13 is pretty much what you're going to die believing" (2004). And as Paul tells us, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12).

What is the difference between spiritual climate and student spiritual outcomes? Spiritual climate describes the overall perspectives and actions within a community toward

Christ followers and spiritual truth. Although climate can be influenced by written policies, often the reality in the hallways and in the faculty room can be quite different than foundational statements. There are multiple elements that contribute to the spiritual climate of any Christian school, and there can be significant differences in perspectives among faculty, parents, administrators, elementary students, and secondary students. There are "seasons" in school life where there is an ebb and flow of spiritual leadership and commitment—one might refer to this as spiritual climate change.

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In contrast to spiritual climate, student spiritual outcomes refer to those goals and expectations we have for our graduates (expected student outcomes) that will include aspects of being a Christ follower. However, student spiritual outcomes differ from other expected student outcomes because of the role of an "outside influence"—the work of the Holy Spirit. In evangelism, for example, we are responsible to live the gospel and share the gospel with others. But we cannot control the response of others: ultimately it is the Holy Spirit that convicts of sin and brings people to the point of salvation. Our responsibility is the messaging, not the results. In a similar way, school leaders can take specific actions to influence spiritual climate. How do leaders deal with high school students who openly mock and scorn serious Christian students and the Scriptures? A culture of grace and truth will confront, instruct, and (we hope) reform mockers, but eventually students who are continually mocking our Lord and His Word may need to leave the community. Such a decision cannot be made lightly. The balance between grace and truth is complex and must be Spirit-led. This is but one example of an action school leaders may take to support a positive spiritual climate.

Are assessments of spiritual climate and student spiritual outcomes valid and helpful? Spiritual climate is measurable, and there are different qualitative and quantitative tools to use. Quantitative measures produce specific numerical percentages, but self-reported data and "the halo effect" within Christian communities can result in questionable conclusions. Qualitative analysis done by objective third parties—which involve multiple focus groups and interviews

with all key constituencies—provide more meaningful data for school leaders (see JuLee Mecham’s article on page 28 of this issue).

However, measuring student spiritual outcomes is more difficult. The first issue is whether measurements of elementary, middle, or high school student spiritual formation is relevant to our goal of producing spiritually mature adults. Another measurement challenge is getting to real heart issues—students in surveys and interviews may tend to give the answers they are expected to give. Anonymous surveys reduce some of the “halo effect,” but cannot completely remove it. Surveys of alumni should include spiritual outcome questions, and are likely to be more objective, but it is difficult to determine the school’s role in the individual’s spiritual journey. Gathering alumni opinions on multiple aspects of their school experience is usually required in the accreditation process and is always helpful. Thus, effective and flourishing schools do assess both spiritual climate and student spiritual outcomes in order to increase their effectiveness, while recognizing the limitations of such data.

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Why are “parent and church partners” included in spiritual formation? The Scriptures support the centrality of three institutions—the family, the church, and the state. The graduates of our schools will function within those three institutions for the rest of their lives. The Christian school community, as well as the Christian college or campus-based ministry, ends at graduation. The church will last until the Lord comes, and as members of the body of Christ, involvement in church life is not optional. Strengthening the bridges and support lines between the Christian school, parents, and the church can help build lifetime connections that continue when Christian schooling ends.

What does a culture of grace and truth look like?

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The school community honors and serves Jesus Christ as Lord—simultaneously seeking grace and truth.

A culture characterized by truth clearly elevates Scripture as the authoritative source of truth. Convictions based on biblical principles are clear in the community. The school keeps the distinction clear between school rules and biblical

mandates. Sin and misbehavior are addressed with love and with consequences.

A grace-filled culture does not ignore sin but provides opportunity for repentance and restoration. School leaders must understand the difference between a rules-and-performance-oriented culture and a culture that works hard to get at motivation and heart issues. When others ask how I’m doing, my standard response is, “Better than I deserve.” That phrase acknowledges a great theological truth—that God does not treat me as my sins deserve because of His great grace—and often opens up a conversation about God’s grace. Grace-filled cultures don’t depend on catchphrases, but there is a deep understanding of grace, and a willingness to use a grace-filled response to the various challenges that exist within all communities.

Are ministry and service opportunities and involvement a significant measure of spiritual formation? Student involvement in ministry and service provides significant learning experiences for students, but these activities in themselves do not equate to significant spiritual formation. However, if we think of the traditional view of spiritual maturity as having “heart, head, and hands,” the hands represent demonstrating our faith in service to others. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:17).

Service and ministry opportunities can be integrated within other school programs, e.g., athletic teams who conduct sports clinics, National Honor Society students who provide tutoring services, etc. Schools should be careful to work with local churches whenever possible, rather than develop school-based ministries that compete directly with church-based programming. However, it is likely that in most schools some school-based outreach or ministry can provide opportunities for students to put feet on their faith through meaningful service.

Conclusion

“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mark 8:36) Spiritual formation is critical to effective and flourishing Christian schools. The additional articles in this issue provide helpful amplification of spiritual formation in the Christian school.

Stephen Dill, EdD, served at Delaware County Christian School in Newtown Square, PA, for 40 years before joining the ACSI staff in 2013. Currently, he leads ACSI’s work in the United States as senior vice president for ACSI USA.

References

Barna, George. *Transforming children into spiritual champions* (Regal Books, 2003), quoted in *Christianity Today*, July 2004, Vol. 48, No. 7, 53

Thapa, Cohen, Guffy, and Higgins-D’Alessandro. 2013. A Review of School Climate Research, *Review of Educational Research*.

The Flourishing School Continuum: Growing Stronger Version 1.0; July 2015

This model provides a high-level summary for school improvement. Few schools are likely to fit every category within a level: this is a continuum from a formative level of school characteristics to a flourishing level. Schools may meet Flourishing standards in some areas but operate at a Formative stage in others. All schools should strive to reach Effective or higher. The red line down the middle of the chart represents accreditation.

Domains	Elements	Formative Level	Maturing Level	Effective Level	Flourishing Level
Board Governance	Foundations	Undocumented mission, vision, values, or philosophy	Developing vision, mission, core values, and philosophy	Clear statements and full alignment of mission, vision, values, and philosophy	Clear statements and alignment; regular review and refinement
	Policies	Little or no written board policy; functioning on bylaws	Basic board policies in place	Clear and written board governance policy; consistent implementation	Board policies systematically reviewed and revised; policy guides key decisions
	Board Development	Board directly involved in management decisions; little review of board function, future planning, or board profiling	Board growing in its understanding of its proper role; some future planning in place; general board profile in place	Board has clear recruitment and nomination processes; some board PD; strategic plan and profile in place	Functioning strategic board that reflects board profile; ongoing board PD; annual board evaluation (of the board); ongoing planning processes
	Roles and HOS	No clear delineation of board and head of school (HOS) roles	Clear definition of board and HOS roles; clear HOS job description	Stable, positive board/HOS relationship; clear HOS evaluation process	Ongoing board/HOS communication and positive relationship; comprehensive and systematic HOS evaluation process
Executive Leadership	Framework	Limited expertise in the Christian School Leadership Framework (CSLF)	Qualified/credentialed HOS; utilizing the CSLF to build the school and governance culture	HOS demonstrates many "heart, relational, and strategic competencies" of the CSLF; keeps board informed	HOS embodies the CSLF, contributes to the Christian school movement, supports board, regularly reports strategic plan to board and community
	Personnel	Limited capacity or support in recruitment and evaluation of school personnel	Some recruitment and support (coaching or mentoring); inconsistent evaluation processes	Developing recruitment strategies, employee support, annual performance reviews	Intentional recruitment strategies, robust formative and summative performance reviews, linked to professional development
	Stability and Engagement	High turnover in HOS position	Reasonable stability of HOS; engaged with some stakeholders; effective board engagement	Stability in HOS position; strong engagement with all stakeholders; engagement with external communities	Consistent HOS leadership; HOS inspires the community, is highly respected by stakeholders, networks and blesses other schools, and has vision for Kingdom support
School Viability	Operating Systems	Lax financial controls; no external reviews; no attention to risk management; little to no tuition assistance	Feasible financial plans in place; some external financial review; limited risk management; tuition assistance available	Review/audit by external CPA; clear budgeting, reporting, attention to risk management; tuition assistance implemented and assessed; strategic financial plan	Hard-income driven; regular audits; meet ECFE standards; significant funding for tuition assistance; thorough risk management process; rolling strategic financial planning process
	Advancement	No formal admissions or development processes or staffing; use of fund-raising sales/events	Beginning donor cultivation; written admissions process	Some advancement staff in place; some successful fund-raising efforts; mission-driven admissions policies	Mature development/admissions functions; successful annual fund, capital campaigns, endowment
	Financial Resources	Financial viability in question; cash flow and debt concerns; no formal budget process	Formal budgeting process; debt manageable	Financially viable; balanced budget evident; growing cash reserve; debt reduction plan in place	Cash reserves >5% of budget; debt service <5% of budget; long-term financial viability evident
	Facilities	Inadequate, insufficient facilities; low-level functionality	Adequate facilities; developing educationally usable spaces	Well-developed and appealing physical plant; branding is evident	Physical plant supporting all programs; distinctive presence and branding

Domains	Elements	Formative Level	Maturing Level	Effective Level	Flourishing Level
Student Learning	Curriculum	"Off the shelf" curriculum in use; no systematic review	Basic curriculum in place; some systematic review; moving to comprehensive documentation	Clear scope and sequence; fully documented curriculum; strong faculty involvement in processes	Curriculum fully mapped and fully integrated with biblical worldview; regularly and collaboratively reviewed
	Exceptional Students	Little differentiation; no ability to serve exceptional students	Some differentiation; limited ability to serve exceptional needs	Differentiation evident; programs and services available to meet needs of exceptional students	Differentiation pervasive; programs and services for exceptional students effective and assessed at all levels
	Student Outcomes (ESOs)	No identified outcomes; little or no clarity or consensus on ESOs	Basic objectives/goals for ESOs are documented; full ESOs not developed	Well-defined, communicated ESOs in all areas of student development; some assessments available (internal and external) for the ESOs	Well-communicated ESOs embedded into curriculum driving all programmatic decisions; analysis of ESO assessments drive school improvement
	Assessment of Learning	No external assessments of student learning	Some use of standardized assessments; minimal analysis, use of data, or tracking of graduates	Annual tracking of internal and external assessments; basic data analysis and use of test results to improve instruction	Annual analysis of internal and external assessments; tracking of student success at the next level; school improvement built on student assessment information
	Biblical Worldview	Little intentional biblical integration (other than the textbooks)	Developing biblical integration; some training of faculty	Biblical integration evident in curriculum documents and in planned and unplanned activities	Biblical integration pervasive; strong evidence of a biblical worldview developed and assessed
	Cocurricular	No cocurricular options	Limited cocurricular options	Many cocurricular options	Abundant cocurricular options in broad areas
	Technology	Minimal or no technology	Limited technology available	Current technology used and integrated into instruction; regular staff training	Pervasive use; training and evaluation of technology for staff and students in all areas of instruction
	Climate	More incidental than intentional; control; conformity	Some goal statements; grace and truth culture unbalanced	Clear outcomes for spiritual formation; balanced grace and truth culture	Student spiritual leadership evident; embedded grace and truth culture
	Parent and Church Partners	No intentional training for parents or church involvement	Encouragement of biblical parenting and church involvement	Intentional but informal teaching regarding biblical parenting and church involvement	Formal teaching/mentoring to develop biblical parenting and church involvement
	Assessment	Formative; no data collected	Anecdotal data on spiritual growth	Some data (surveys, follow-up) on student and alumni spiritual growth	Ongoing external assessments of spiritual climate, student outcomes, alumni
School Culture	Ministry/Service Opportunities	Occasional opportunities	Planned but inconsistent opportunities	Students have ministry, service, or discipleship opportunities	Significant school ministry resource commitment; multiple opportunities
	Faculty Culture	Some faculty not qualified; significant employee turnover	Qualified faculty; mixed employee morale; limited turnover	Stable, well-qualified, committed faculty; positive employee culture	Mission-driven, qualified faculty and administration; culture of mutual respect and support
	PD Culture	Little planning or time allotment for professional growth	Limited, unfocused professional development; individually initiated; "a la carte" approach	Faculty engaged in regular, systematic professional development; resourced adequately	Clear evidence of holistic, comprehensive, well-resourced professional development culture
	Organization	Minimal organizational structure	Some systems, policies, and structures	Documented systems, policies, structures, assessments	Actions based on ongoing assessments of student, faculty, and school cultures
	Student Culture	Fragile student culture	Developing student culture; limited sense of school pride/ownership	Positive student culture and sense of school pride/ownership	Clear evidence of positive student leadership; supportive student body
	Accreditation	Little interest in accreditation	STAR, candidacy, or in process	REACH 2.0 (option for dual regional)	REACH + Regional + Exemplary Accreditation