Christian Schools and Addressing Cultural Challenges

P. George Tryfiates April 23, 2019
As modern American culture strays ever further from its Judeo-Christian foundations, Christian schools sometimes find themselves unexpectedly thrust into the midst of conflict. Often, conflict manifests as a political issue—and politics, while always a pretty ugly arena, seems uglier than ever over the last decade or two. Education choice, though a popular issue, can be a catalyst for politicians to target religious schools for criticism.

Two years ago, an opponent of education choice savaged an ACSI member school in a House subcommittee hearing. And just last January, another member school faced a barrage of negative media when it re-hired a former employee whose husband is a prominent politician. These things happened even when a school’s leadership is going about its normal business, as was the case in both of these instances. We’ve been thinking through how to talk about the unique value of Christian education in such circumstances, and are sharing suggestions in the hope that they will be generative and helpful to Christian schools and educators.

The Central Message: An Invitation

The central message we need to share is that Christians aren’t “banning” anyone: rather, we’re inviting everyone who agrees to come along with us. This is true of nearly any
sector in our society: presumably a media outlet would hire employees who support freedom of the press, or an environmental group would hire only those who are committed to recycling. In neither example is the group “banning” those with different views, but rather hiring those whose beliefs align with the employer. Similarly, a politician who hires only members from the same party does not automatically “hate” the opposing party, by declining to hire its adherents.

Like any organization or company in most any sector of society, religious schools of all stripes (not just Christian) make clear their values and convictions, and the implications for the education they provide. They do so explicitly through their statements of faith and the policies which derive from them. Such schools invite—they do not coerce—like-minded students, families, and employees to participate in this religious education.

If Christian schools are issuing an invitation, to what are students, families, and employees being invited? The answer is that whatever may be going on culturally or politically, Christian schools simply want to uphold ancient Christian ethical standards—and it should be noted that those standards include significantly more than just sexual ethics (for example, biblical standards include truthfulness, faithfulness, kindness, generosity, and love for neighbor). The school will teach those standards and is committed to helping students live them out, because they are so much better for all of us and they help us all to thrive. No school is looking for reasons to dismiss students. In real life, every school wants every child joyfully to appreciate and even to embrace the Christian faith. Happily, again, no one is compelling the student to attend. Likewise, government must not compel schools to admit students and families or hire employees whose ethical standards may conflict with those of the school.

**Specific Responses to Culture**

Below are some ideas to help your school meet the challenges when it finds itself at the center of the storm—or even right now, before the storm bursts. School leaders can adapt the concepts for their parents, student body, friends and supporters, and even, if they decide it appropriate, for media.

1. **If all education is secular, there is no diversity.** Therefore, Christian schools should be allowed to be fully Christian; Jewish schools Jewish; Muslim schools Muslim; Catholic or Lutheran schools fully Catholic or Lutheran. That applies not only in a statement of faith, but also in their practices, standards, and codes of conduct. Families
should be free to choose a genuinely faith-based option. (It also applies to schools dedicated to a particular pedagogy: for example, a Montessori school should be free to follow Montessori pedagogy).

2. Politicians or others should not exclude schools from serving the community through parental choice programs just because they may disagree with a school’s faith-based ethical, moral, and conduct standards. Reasonable people are allowed to disagree with one another.

3. Reasonable people can disagree on sexual ethics/conduct. It is good to allow for a diversity of education options. Hiring people who agree with your ethical convictions is not “banning” those who don’t.

4. The Judeo-Christian ethic is reasonable and has stood the test of time. The Obergefell court, which ruled in favor of same-sex marriage, said that the Christian view of marriage “long has been held … in good faith by reasonable and sincere people.” The full quote is: “Marriage, in their view, is by its nature a gender-differentiated union of man and woman. This view long has been held—and continues to be held—in good faith by reasonable and sincere people here and throughout the world” (Obergefell v. Hodges).

5. Parental choice is exactly that: a choice. No one is forced to take advantage of the excellent education Christian schools offer. But, it is and should be available to anyone who wants it and who qualifies. Schools make clear where they stand precisely so applicants will know what to expect and what they offer.

6. School choice programs that serve low- to moderate-income families especially should include the widest diversity of school choice options. Just because a family is poor doesn’t mean their only education options must be secular.

7. Christians have a particular vision of human flourishing. Others may disagree, but we ask only that they consider our view too and certainly not act to stifle it. To the Christian, our view of human flourishing is that God created us for joy and His loving commands are designed for exactly that—including His standard for marriage between one man, one woman, for one lifetime with children as God may give. More than that: He forgives when we sin and repent. He even tenderly walks with us through the consequences of our moral failures. This is such good news: God loves us and calls us to turn from what is contrary to His standards so we might experience joy inexpressible and
full of glory. Jesus assures us that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. A clean conscience is a wonderful thing.

Education choice debates often create the context in which these issues arise; that’s how the ideas above are arranged, but the principles apply far more broadly. We’d like to invite feedback (via comments below, or email us at Legal_Legislative@acsi.org) on other talking points that have proven effective in your own circumstances.

**Do Now: Be Proactive**

In addition to reviewing these messages, one important idea that may help should your school end up in a cultural cross fire: now is a good time to reach out to elected officials—*before* there’s a hot, emotional, political, or cultural issue roiling your community. Consider meeting with your elected officials or inviting them to the school, to show how you advance the common good and put a face (of your school, your students, and your families) with a name.

When you host elected officials at your school, *don’t talk politics*. Instead, focus on how your school benefits the entire community and what God is doing through you. Think about what you hope the elected official might say at family dinner the evening after the visit. And, let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

**About the Author**

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