

# Perspectives In Christian Education

Focus On  
Parent & Student  
Relationships



Dan Burrell, Ed.D - Philip C. Johnson, Ph.D - Paul Tatham, M.S.

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**"Focus on Parent and Student Relationships"**

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## PREFACE

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*“May we never forget that our calling is more spiritual than academic, more ministry than vocation, more eternal than temporal.”*

—Dan L. Burrell, Ed.D.

The Christian education movement has come of age. From its humble beginnings among mainline Protestant churches in the first half of this century, through the rapid expansion fueled by the reaction of evangelicals and fundamentalists to negative court rulings during the 60s, 70s and early 80s, to the “sorting-out period” of the last decade, Christian education has continued to change, adapt and mature. The last thirty years have seen an explosion in the quantity and quality of Christian schools. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was widely reported that Christian schools were starting at the rate of one every eight hours. Christian curriculum publishers, most notably A Beka Books and Accelerated Christian Education, assisted local churches and boards in establishing schools complete with training for staff and detailed curriculum.

Today, the movement is more stable and less reactionary. Teachers and administrators now have a generation of experience and, in ever-increasing numbers, advanced de-

grees. Our schools are as diverse as our nation. Large, multifaceted schools serving thousands of students can be found in the same city as small, specialty schools that may serve only a score of students. Our graduates are gaining recognition for their excellence and character.

Yet, from time to time a reminder should be given as to the discipline of our philosophy, the objectives of our heritage and the outcomes we can expect to see in our future. Not every Christian school teaches a biblical worldview. Some “Christian” schools appear to be philosophically adrift and have largely become religious prep schools with a flavor that is far more *private* than *spiritual*. Educational choice, outcome-based education, Goals 2000 and other initiatives will require Christian schools that wish to remain relevant to examine their foundation and their goals.

With those thoughts in mind, the authors and the leadership of the Florida Association of Christian Colleges and Schools offers this first effort in a series, to provide a handbook of sorts to the experienced and novice educators who serve in Christian schools. It is important that we maintain a Christian perspective, an appreciation for our heritage as a movement and a focus on our endeavor. You will not agree with every suggestion in every chapter. However, it is the desire of the authors to provoke your thought, challenge your goals and encourage your mission as we lead Christian education into the next millennium. May we never forget that our calling is more spiritual than academic, more ministry than vocation, more eternal than temporal. We hope that these chapters will motivate you to a new level of excellence and ministry in your work in Christian education.

# CHAPTER ONE



## SCREENING PROBLEM PARENTS

*“The most crucial components of screening must include prayer, wisdom and spiritual discernment.”*

—Dan L. Burrell, Ed.D.







Few things can make an admissions director's day more, than a positive interview with a family who is active in a sound Bible-preaching church and who desire to put their fresh-faced and respectful offspring into a wholesome educational environment where they will be nurtured in the admonition of the Lord. However, reality quickly sets in when the next interview of the morning is with a sullen adolescent who is sporting the latest "do" and is equipped with a variety of rings, chains and studs displayed in the most unique, not to mention uncomfortable, way. With perspiration forming on his upper lip, the interviewer feels the pressure of accurately explaining the philosophy and environment of the Christian school while desiring to sense some flicker of interest in the eyes of the prospective honor student/detention king that would indicate that he can be reached with the gospel and goals of the school.

The responsibility of screening and selecting students for your school is essential to your ministry. We have all experienced how one rebellious student can affect an

entire class. Yet we also have seen what the miracle of salvation can do for an insolent spirit. Striking the balance between protecting the environment of the school and reaching out to those who are still “under construction” requires a great deal of discernment. Not every family who applies for entrance into a Christian school does so with the right motivation. We shouldn’t accept every student who has parents that simply state that they are seeking a “Christian” environment. Nor can we coldly send elsewhere every student that just doesn’t impress us with their grasp of Scripture and passion for world evangelism. A wise admissions director learns how to screen and what questions to ask, because there are several reasons for wanting a child in a Christian school that may spell trouble ahead.

### **Reason # 1: Trouble at the previous school**

Many view Christian schools as “reform” institutions or schools of “last resort.” While there are several fine Christian institutions that exist to salvage troubled young people (usually teens), the average Christian school is not equipped to handle most students who have experienced substantial disciplinary problems in previous schools. Severe behavioral difficulties in young children are often related to the parental philosophy of discipline in the home and sometimes (though not as often as diagnosed) the existence of emotional or behavioral disorders. As the child enters adolescence, teenage rebellion, spiritual problems and other factors come into play.

### **Reason # 2: Severe academic extremes**

It is important for the school administration to determine the range of academic or intellectual deviations the

school is prepared and equipped to serve. It is dishonest to accept a student with severe learning disabilities if the school does not have a course of study or program developed and equipped to service that child. A school with no gifted program should be absolutely candid when explaining the course offerings to an academic high-achiever. A qualified tester should be on site to assist with student assessments.

### **Reason # 3: “Problems” with the previous school**

This reason is sometimes valid. A discerning administrator should try to ascertain the nature of problems that may have existed at the previous school or with previous teachers or administrators. I have learned to be very wary of the parent who enters an admissions interview with a long list of grievances against teachers “who are out to get” their child or have “unfair” policies, etc. I know many, if not most, of the other Christian educators in our community and they have earned my trust. Hopefully, a relationship can exist between you and the other providers of Christian education in your community (and even those in the public sector) that qualifies them to the “benefit of the doubt” and at least a courtesy call to learn their side of the story. Many of the Christian schools in our community have an informal pact that “we won’t believe everything that a disgruntled parents says about your school, if you won’t believe everything that the disgruntled parent says about our school.” While it may be titillating to hear of the “unjust” practices of the school across town, a little research may reveal that the “injustice” would have been just as real at your school.

One of the most effective ways to screen potential problem parents is to develop a screening instrument that can

be given via a questionnaire or an interview. This can be done casually or formally, though I generally find that a casual interview containing a few key questions generally gives me the information I need.

Here are some questions you may want to ask prospective parents who are applying for admission of their students to your school:

**1) “Can you please provide me with the names and phone numbers of your child’s most recent teacher(s) and principal?”**

I have found that reticence to do so or an “explanation” of the negative responses you are likely to receive generally does not bode well for a good future relationship. Again, having a friendly relationship with other administrators helps provide discernment to responses.

**2) If they are transferring from another Christian or private school: “May I call the business administrator of your previous school to make sure that your bill is current and to ask for a financial recommendation?”**

If I can slip into *editorial* mode for just a moment, I think it is unethical and dishonest for Christian-school administrators to knowingly accept students into their schools who have an outstanding balance at their previous school. Many families play games with schools, accruing substantial financial obligations and then withdrawing their children rather than paying the bill. When we accept families who owe others, we are facilitating their sin and we can expect that they will do the same thing to us in the future. I would encourage the business administrators of area schools to make a pact wherein they agree not to accept

students who have not made their bill current upon applying at your school and/or withdrawing from theirs. A unified front in this area will provide accountability and professionalism in our finances and will ultimately train parents in issues of honesty and integrity.

**3) Ask the students: “Why do you want to attend our school?”**

I have even been known to ask the student privately, “Do you really want to go to school here?” Particularly by the time a student reaches secondary school, if he or she does not want to attend your school, you can anticipate substantial trouble down the road in many cases. Often through the posture and demeanor of the student during the interview, I can tell whether or not they are applying because they recognize a need in their life and want to go to a Christian school or if this is a case where the parents are requiring the student to go to a Christian school. There have been some instances in which I have made exceptions and allowed a non-cooperative student admission in the hope that he would experience a change of heart, but I must confess that the success stories have been rather limited.

**4) Ask the student about behavior that will bring them into conflict with the school’s conduct code.**

If your school has a policy against the use of tobacco, find out if the student smokes. If you have a policy against rock music, find out who the student’s favorite musicians are. There are going to be conflicts in any school-student relationship. It is a good idea to try and determine the potential for future conflicts and over what issues they may erupt.

**5) Specifically ask, “Have you ever been suspended or expelled from school?”**

In our school district, a student who manages to be suspended or expelled from public school is...shall we say...*significantly* behaviorally challenged? Chances are, if we admit them into our student body, we can anticipate the addition of several new rules in the student handbook that we had never even *considered* before. Beware that it is not uncommon for parents and students to lie about this, and a phone call to the previous dean of discipline generally exposes the sins of the past. We also have a policy that addresses this problem: Misrepresentations made to gain entrance into the school, upon coming to light, will result in immediate dismissal.

**6) “Are you involved or have you ever been involved in any legal action against a school or school employee?”**

Considering the litigious nature of our culture, it is a good idea to ascertain early into the relationship what the potential for depositions and court dates might be.

Here are some other recommendations you might want to consider to assist you with screening your students:

1. Request reference forms from at least three people who know the student including their pastor/Sunday school teacher, a former teacher or school administrator, and a non-family member who has known the student for at least one year.
2. Require the student to write a paragraph or page detailing why they want to attend your school.
3. Have the student complete an “interest inventory” which should give you some insight into their personal world.

The following are some sample items you could put on such an inventory:

- What do you do on a typical Sunday?
  - If you had a free hour, how would you spend it?
  - What is your favorite TV show?
  - Who is your favorite entertainer?
  - What is your favorite verse from the Scriptures?
  - What do you want to be doing in 10 years?
  - If you died today, where would you go? Why did you answer in the way you did?
  - What is the last good book that you have read?
  - Describe your relationship with your parents.
  - Whose choice is it for you to go to a Christian school?
  - What percentage of your friends uses tobacco? Alcohol?
4. Be very specific about your expectations for your students. Make sure that they understand the homework load, code of conduct, the uniform or dress code, limitations on outside activities, etc.
  5. Consider the use of a *probationary* period. This allows time for observation and provides an “escape hatch” should the student demonstrate this wasn’t a good choice.
  6. Consider a separate, private interview with older students. During this type of interview, many students will be more comfortable opening up with their fears, questions and hesitations.
  7. Have a standard for evaluation. Occasionally we feel pressured to make entrance exceptions for a student who can infect others with a poor attitude. By having an ad-



missions committee review applications or by having some sort of entrance policy, the temptation to lower the bar on entrance requirements is diminished.

Now, personally, this chapter has been far too negative for my taste. So let me end it with some positive suggestions for attracting the *right* kind of families to your school ministry.

### **Utilize personal contacts**

The number one most effective way to advertise your school is *word of mouth*. There is no more effective advertisement than a satisfied customer. Encourage your current, satisfied families to recommend potential new students to your school. We have even encouraged our families to recruit by offering a credit to their account for each student that they recommend who enrolls in our school.

### **Put your students on display in good churches**

Form a performance choir or a drama or puppet team that can visit local churches and minister. This is great training for your students and a great testimony for your school.

### **Emphasize the positives**

Traditional academics, family values, firm-but-loving discipline, high academic standards, values instruction, etc., are terms that communicate your philosophy clearly and which may help you attract those who desire those characteristics for their child's learning environment.