Seventh-day Adventist Education in Australia

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The purpose of Seventh-day Adventist education in Australia is to develop in the faculty and students a Christian worldview that leads to lives that are committed to Christ and to the mission of the Church.

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) education system is the largest employer in the South Pacific Division. School enrollment increased by 25 percent between 2008 and 2018. The education budget exceeds A$250 million per annum. The schools provide excellent facilities and in 2018 had an enrollment of 13,555 students. Much of the enrollment growth in Australian SDA schools over the past 20 years has been from the broader community.
**Origins of SDA Involvement in Education**

Ellen G. White fostered the establishment of Adventist schools in Australia. A prime example of her vision for SDA education in Australia is Avondale College of Higher Education. During the 20th century, SDA schools took root in major capital cities and in regional areas where a significant population of SDAs existed. Often, such schools were small primary schools that focused on meeting the Christian education needs of SDA families. Many were located in rooms at the back of churches and had little public profile. The development of secondary school facilities took longer.

Up until the 1980s, SDA schools were perceived as existing primarily to serve the needs of SDA families. The function of schools was perceived to be shielding young people from the influences of a secular world and to inculcate SDA values. There was little effort to promote SDA education outside the immediate church community, and the majority of Seventh-day Adventist families supported their local school. Parents and the church community often gave freely of their time and finances to support their school.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, several factors combined to cause the South Pacific Division to call two major meetings to consider the shape and direction of Seventh-day Adventist education in Australia. The purpose of the meetings, held in 1996 and 1997, was to consider the Church’s position regarding the mission of its schools. Factors potentially impacting mission included demands for higher levels of professionalism and improved educational facilities by both SDAs and the broader school community, the decline of available SDA families to maintain educationally competitive schools, competition from rapidly growing Christian schools, calls for the inclusion of non-SDAs on school boards and for greater autonomy at the local school level, moves to maximize use of state and commonwealth funding, and frustration from school boards regarding the strictures of South Pacific Division policy in raising loan funds for the realization of school master plans.

The stated purpose of the Summit Review was to devise “a process designed to develop a more efficient and effective system of Adventist education and to reposition our schools in the broader community as a means towards enhancing the mission of the Church.”

The intent of the summit meetings was clear—to develop a more professional and viable system that was loyal to the mission of the Church. A wide range of recommendations was generated in the areas of organizational structure, financial management, quality assurance management, and the preservation of SDA education ethos.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the summit meetings was the signal to the educational community that SDA schools were indeed an authentic arm of the mission of the SDA Church in Australia. Educators were provided with a brief that extended beyond providing educational services to SDA families, and they now had the opportunity to evangelize in the broader community by offering quality education to all who were willing to respect the SDA worldview and associated values.

**Identifying an SDA Worldview and Its Implications for Schools**

The goal of Australian SDA schools, in conjunction with parents and Church communities, is to ensure that the development of a Christian worldview leads to changed lives and commitment to the mission of the Church. To support the goal of ensuring that an SDA worldview remains the focus of the Australian SDA School context, several significant programs and projects have been initiated over the last decade as follows:

**SDA Encounter Curriculum**

In 2008, Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) collaborated with the New Zealand Pacific Union Conference to develop a new Bible curriculum for kindergarten through grade 10. At that time, most teachers were either using the North American Division Bible program developed in the 1970s or were creating their own materials to meet the needs of their students. The Encounter curriculum project commenced in 2008.

One of the first decisions was that the Bible itself should be the textbook in Bible class and that Christ’s methods should be at the forefront of teaching. The planning committee adopted Lanelle Cobbin’s Transformational Planning Framework, which described eight learning phases as the basis for pedagogical planning and as a vehicle for sharing Christ with students in each Encounter unit.

The production team produced 98 primary Encounter units and 34 secondary Encounter units. All units were resourced to ensure that teachers of Bible classes were well prepared to engage with the students. To date, negotiations to use the Encounter materials have been conducted with the North American Division and the British Union, and inquiries have been received from a number of other entities within the global church.

The SDA Encounter curriculum is being extended into both the early learning sector and the senior secondary domain. In the early learning arena, the biblical studies program has been named Early Encounters with Jesus. Twenty-eight fully resourced units are under production, with ten units being used in early learning centers across Australia and New Zealand.

New senior secondary units are being trialed in Australian schools. The aim of these units is to engage senior secondary students in the establishment and nourishment of their own Christian worldview. Christian apologetics and...
ethical issues are at the heart of each unit, with teachers acting as mentors and coaches as students deepen their understanding of and commitment to Christ in a postmodern world.

**The SDA School: A Community of Faith and Learning**

The bedrock of SDA education is its mission, vision, and values. In order to provide schools with clarity and direction in relation to SDA identity, an SDA identity working party was formed in 2012. The team created The SDA School: A Community of Faith and Learning Model.

At its core were the beliefs and values of SDA education that school leaders and staff are called to uphold. The flow between the key elements of belonging, believing, and becoming explained the complex and dynamic relationships between supporting students on a personal journey of balanced growth while at all times maintaining relationships that are Christ-centered, Bible-based, service-orientated, and kingdom-directed.

The articulation of the Community of Faith and Learning Model has provided SDA schools in Australia with greater clarity and purpose. A number of resources are available to assist the implementation of the model. They include a set of values for SDA schools and a curriculum framework series that is designed to assist teachers in infusing SDA identity into their programs and units.

**The Quality SDA Schools Framework**

In early 2012, ASA appointed a school improvement officer and formed a working group to guide the development of a school review and reflection tool similar to Education Scotland’s How Good Is Our School? and those developed in several systems across Australia. The working group designed a framework consisting of 20 components in four domains.

The goal was to maintain a central focus on student learning outcomes while recognizing the range of additional facets required to build an effective school. During 2012, more than one hundred SDA educators were involved in the development of rating criteria to populate the 20 components of the school improvement framework. Professional conversations were generated within the component writing groups. They provided insight into the conversations that now occur in staff rooms and within school communities across the country.

In May 2013, the new school improvement tool for SDA schools was officially launched as the Quality Adventist Schools Framework (QASF) at the Educational Leaders Conference held at Wyong, New South Wales. The QASF program provided an exciting opportunity for SDA schools to move beyond the long-established accreditation program. However, it became clear that producing the QASF was only the first part of a process of aligned cultural change in SDA schools.

The philosophical underpinning of SDA education describes the balance among the development of the spiritual, mental, physical, and social outcomes for students. The 20 components of the QASF reflect this holistic approach, which was inherent in the four domains of the framework—SDA Identity, Learning and Teaching, Leading School Improvement, and Community Partnerships. However, transforming a tool into an aligned school improvement strategy for a diverse range of schools is complex.

ASA recognized that school leaders and staff work in highly accountable and challenging school environments and daily face a plethora of demands on their time and energy. Adding a new systemic requirement to their lives without providing clearly aligned vision, training, and support would result in low levels of fidelity to the QASF. Hence ASA retained the services of their school improvement officer and created an aligned system school improvement strategy.

The model of aligned cultural change in SDA Schools was based on the mission, vision, and values of SDA education. However, it was recognized that the key to achieving the mission, vision, and values was the spiritual commitment of school leaders and staff. Ensuring ongoing spiritual nurture and professional mentoring and coaching continues to be a challenge. Chaplains play a key role in this regard, and ASA is intent on ensuring that chaplains are focusing on the spiritual nurture and support of their staff as indicated in their role description.

**SDA Distinctives Program**

Given that teachers are the heart and soul of any school, ASA conducted a series of SDA distinctive days for various school companies around Australia. Attendees at this one-day course were primarily personnel who either had not trained at Avondale University College or have been absent from SDA education for a significant period of time.

The course considered topics such as the history and purpose of SDA education, the importance of a Christian world, the foundational beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist church, curriculum for and methodological approaches to SDA education, and the practical implications of working in an SDA school.

**Leadership Programs**
In recognition of the key pastoral roles that school leaders and teachers play in SDA schools, a range of significant programs has been embedded.

First, it must be noted that all SDA conference companies have shaped their annual staff-training events to include a strong spiritual dimension. This focus demonstrates a broad commitment by all school companies to serve the mission of the Church through SDA education.

Second, ASA has conducted a biennial educational leaders’ conference for Australian and New Zealand school leaders. The aim of these conferences has been to value, refresh, and nurture the spiritual heart of each school leader. The program runs for three days and includes a range of keynote speakers and workshops designed to inform and inspire school leaders while giving them time to interact with their peers and be refreshed for the resumption of their roles.

Third, ASA has conducted a biennial Aspiring Leaders Program. The goal of the five-day residential program was to create opportunities for future leaders to consider their spiritual priorities and to provide a range of leadership skills and perspectives. Fundamentally, the program was intended as the starting point of a journey toward leadership in which participants gain credit from Avondale University College toward a master of education degree. In addition, school company directors of education and school principals provide ongoing opportunities to develop their leadership capacity through acting roles and tailored professional development programs.

Looking Forward

SDA education in Australia focuses on the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. SDA schools provide educational opportunities for almost 14,000 students. When parents and siblings are added to this number, SDA education is serving a clientele of over 56,000 individuals each day.

Maintaining a strong partnership between pastoral ministries and educational ministries, as coequal partners in achieving the mission of the Church, remains a priority. There are significant forces leading to the potential for loss of mission. The focus of both ministries needs to be on “mission shift,” where innovative approaches to discipling are explored to meet the needs of a postmodern society.

SOURCES


NOTES

1. This article is written largely from the personal knowledge and experience of the author, who, at the time of writing, was the Education director of the Australian Union Conference and head of Adventist Schools Australia.


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