

Schools as a Common Good

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The United States Census Bureau recently released the data it collected on public schools for the 2016 year, including the amount of money spent. The data indicates that the public school systems are spending an average of \$11,762 per student in their care.¹ Private schools generally operate on a smaller budget, but their per pupil expenditures still run into the thousands of dollars. These types of numbers naturally lead to some common questions. How do we justify such expenses? Are our schools worth the significant amount of money we spend on them? What good is a school, really? The most common answers to these questions often focus on the good a school provides for an individual student. A school teaches students how to work with people, build social skills, and helps them make friends. A school teaches skills that make students valuable workers, ensuring that each individual will be able to find a job or career. In Christian schools, a school also teaches a student about the truths of the Christian faith and encourages them to make that faith an integral part of their lives and worldview. These are all good answers, but they don't complete the picture of a school's value. A Christian school also provides benefits to its community, a value though often overlooked and hard to quantify, is real nonetheless.

A Tie that Binds

The first way in which a school serves the good of its community is through the social ties it creates and supports. A school is never sustained by the efforts of a single individual, it is always the result of a group of people who come together with a shared purpose. Those people include the staff, students, parents, churches, business partners, school board, alumni, financial supporters, and others that have an interest in the success of the school. As the school brings these people together it provides a common experience and a shared value that deepens the connectedness of the community. A school that actively engages its stakeholders can be a true asset by reinforcing a genuine sense of mutual care and camaraderie. In a society where people are becoming more socially isolated than ever before, any implement which brings

people together in this way is of great value. This is especially true for private Christian schools. Because there is no reliance on federal or state funding, all the support is generated by the local church or churches and the community that surrounds them. Likewise, almost all major decisions are made by local leaders and representatives. The church community collectively owns the school and is brought closer together through that shared ownership. While a church is more than just a social grouping, it is indubitably stronger when its members can come together in the type of fellowship and commonality that the support of a Christian school can provide.

A Source of Potential

Another way in which a school serves its community is through the preparation of “servants to the public” from one generation to the next. In a secular setting, this translates into the production of people who serve as anything from paramedics to sanitation workers. Schools make sure that there will always be people who are trained to keep their community safe and functioning. A church is like a secular community in that it also needs a collection of people who support it through their service. Individual churches are structured in different ways, but they all need people who are willing to serve by preaching, singing, discipleship, performing administrative tasks, handling finances, teaching, and taking care of church property. Even a church that has all of these responsibilities covered should be preparing for the day when the tasks need to be passed on to a new generation. A school provides the church with a place to identify and prepare individuals who possess the gifts for those positions of service. It is common for schools to encourage the development of gifts such as speech, creativity, and written expression, then display them before the community in the form of special programs or performances. These activities keep the community informed of the potential that exists among its young people and helps them identify those who might best serve the community in a variety of ways.

A Bastion of Values

Finally, and possibly most important, a school provides the church with a point of reference for, and transmission of, shared values and culture. Because a school is generally under the power of the local community as mentioned above, it becomes a reflection of the community’s values and beliefs. Making decisions about the school can force a church to truly evaluate what it believes and how it should be practiced and communicated. Whatever is truly believed by the

church will find its way into the school, either in daily operations or in the content that is taught. A school with a healthy relationship with a church community can become an expression of the church, a public example of how its faith can be lived out and practiced. Not only does the school reflect the church community's values, it transmits them to the students under its care. The school sets an example and encourages patterns of behavior that have the potential to last a lifetime. In one sense, a school can serve as a conduit from the church to the students that attend the school, teaching the basic tenets of faith as well as how to apply the Christian faith to daily life and action. A school that serves a distinct culture will pass on cultural practices and traditions as well as the truths and beliefs of the church. There have always been Anabaptist groups who place a great deal of value in their distinct heritage, whether it has been expressed through clothing, language, holidays, foods, or music. For those who value their cultural background, a school can support efforts to pass on that identity to their children. In these ways the school becomes a tool for the preservation of the beliefs and culture of a church community and promotes its continuation from generation to generation.

What Good is a School?

In an age where schools broadcast their test scores, brag about their graduate employment rates, and celebrate their most successful students, it is important to not lose sight of the larger value of a school. The work it does on behalf of each student in its care is of utmost importance, but a good school can and should be honored for the significant good it can do for the community it serves. So what good is a school? It seems safe to say that the benefit of Christian schools, while significant to each student, also extends to the church, community, and ultimately to the Kingdom of God.

¹"Education Spending Per Student by State." Governing Magazine: State and Local Government News for America's Leaders, Dr. Mark Funkhouser, 1 June 2018, www.governing.com/gov-data/education-data/state-education-spending-per-pupil-data.html.
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