



What About the Parents?

Our Journey of Parent Induction

By Erik Hofsink

Primarily, parent induction provides a framework to clarify the school's position on the absolute truths of God's Word. It also provides an opportunity to welcome new families into the school and introduce them to a strong community and caring culture.

Inducting parents into non-denominational Christian schools must be as mandatory as the induction of new staff.

A real problem

When I was first confronted with the brutal realities of enrolment in a 'closed', non-denominational Christian school, there was no place to hide. How do I know that those who say they are Christian really are? Does a pastoral reference, or church membership, guarantee a faith? What sort of church is this (I have never heard of it)? How could you say that you have been looking for a church for two months and have not found one? Who is this small group leader that thinks they are qualified to write a pastoral reference? Why do you want enrolment but immediately state your inability to pay?

Despite these realities, I sensed one thing very clearly; there were just too many desperate people, and we could not ignore them. Keenly motivated to move from a closed enrolment school to an open enrolment quickly, I approached the school board. To me it was a foregone conclusion that they would see and appreciate the need. They must agree that our non-denominational Christian school is a 'broad church'. Refusing to consider myself naïve, my approach to the board was not as well-received as I expected. Another brutal reality. Yet being the highly respected, incredibly passionate, and beautiful parents that they were, I had to forgive them for being shocked and confronted by my suggestion. Why would they not be? They had built a school around early understandings of Christian schooling. It was about sacrificial giving, volunteerism, passion, and a strong sense of community associated with local evangelical churches such as Reformed, Presbyterian, SDA, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc. You don't give that up and simply allow—let alone invite—backslidden, paused, or nominal Christians, Orthodox, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, non-Christians, atheists, and sectarians into this precious built and protected Christian school. It may all sound a bit exaggerated, but you get the sentiment.

It was time to face reality. It was not just the 'good' Christian families that came to seek enrolment; it was desperate people who needed community (preferably based on sound values), ownership, and belonging. Confused, lost, and lonely people in our society were somehow craving that which I had taken for granted. There were just too many people crying out for help and even willing to pay thousands of dollars to have their children educated in our school. Some were desperate to transition their children from a public secular schooling system to a school where their investment would be in a solid education, exemplary standards, and leadership autonomy.

This was both confronting and humbling.

What if we as a Christian school had always believed that we do not exist for evangelism or outreach purposes? What if we had never considered ourselves a charity or social institution? What if those coming from 'outside' have arrived to influence us? It could cost the school's good culture, evangelical tenets, and beloved gospel threads established with blood, sweat, and tears. What if we were not desperate for numeric growth and could easily afford to turn people away? What if the new masses start chanting for religious neutrality and liberalism invades the school? What if, to appease the masses, we begin to dilute our doctrines and water down our fundamental beliefs?

In some way or another, I feel that this may be the story of many Christian schools in Australia.

A real solution

After much healthy debate, a conclusion was reached. There was a lot to gain and a lot to lose for the Kingdom's sake. The board agreed that we should accept students from a non-Christian background into the school. This acceptance would be conditional on parents agreeing to attend a mandatory induction course to clarify who we are and what we believe.

Then came the questions. What do we say in this induction course? What if the gospel message offends? Where can

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we find such a course? What if parents do not attend the course; do we cancel their children's enrolment? What if they disagree with what we say? Are we now a parachurch and should our goal be to convert all parents to Christianity?

Despite the many questions, one thing was obvious; parents who sought enrolment were fully cognisant of the fact that they had applied for enrolment in a Christian school. They had visited the school website and scrolled through social media. They had read reviews and seen our vision statement, core values, and statement of faith. They knew they were seeking partnership with a school that had Jesus Christ written all over it. So, with those fears somewhat allayed, it was time to find an induction course.

It soon became clear that no such course was available 'off the shelf'. There was only one option. We had to design, produce, and present it ourselves.

I remembered attending a few regional Nurture (Parent) Conferences and participating in several Transforming Education (Teacher) Conferences over my years in Christian schools. I was aware of professional learning courses and seminars conducted by the National Institute for Christian Education and all of these contained valuable elements for a Christian education course for parents. Then there were also evangelism courses such as Christianity Explained, Alpha, and Two Ways to Live.

It was decided to construct the first part of the course around the four worldview questions: Who am I?, Where am I?, What's the problem?, and What's the solution? This approach was commonplace in Christian education and informed the curriculum design (creation, fall, redemption, and restoration model) that we required our teachers to work from. With a bit of colour and the addition of pictures and sound, we were ready to roll it out.

It is good to note that worldview teaching, as the only foundation for an understanding or approach to Christian education, has been challenged by some. Research suggests that cultural liturgies are now a significant consideration. A simple creation, fall, redemption, and restoration model has expanded to a much broader concept of formational learning and the course needed to somehow capture that. Recipients must understand what it is that underpins the curriculum and informs the Christian school pedagogy. Once developed,

the beauty of this school-designed course is that it is easily able to be evaluated and improved over time.

A real change

We found out that parents generally did not mind attending a mandatory course. Many were enthusiastic because they were given an opportunity to partner with a school that wanted them to be involved with their children's education. But some struggled to find the time or battled work commitments and health issues. By offering the course four times per year—once every school term—it enabled most people to attend at some stage during the first year. Publishing the dates at the start of the year and sending personalised invitations and reminders also helped. Those who were from a Christian background or actively involved in a church attended eagerly. They were accommodating in group discussions or reaching out to people during breaks which was an extra blessing.

The first few Parent Induction Courses taught us the things that were working and those that were not. To ask parents to offer up a Saturday morning and *not* give them a lavish morning tea did not work. To provide a snapshot of the good news of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the whole Bible, all the commentaries available, and pointing out the differences between Christian denominations did not work either. It was important to have other material to present in the course because even a snapshot of the gospel can be heavy stuff for many people. We learned that the course offered ample opportunity to include specific material about the school's workings, structure, and history. It was an opportunity to educate parents on the school's approach to mindsets, competition, celebrations, communications, car park ethics, grievance processes, and many other things. Parent induction can point out key policies and communication or organisational pathways. In short, it became an opportunity to deal with all the things that cannot adequately be dealt with during an enrolment interview.

We also learnt that it is important to seek anonymous feedback—resisting the desire to work out who said what and why. We also found it helpful to involve the most creative person in the community to help build the presentation and add 'breathers' such as video clips, funny cartoons, and music.

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I can almost deliver the course in my sleep now. Yet, after presenting the course 56 times to a few thousand participants, I still consider it a work in progress.

A real joy

So, what does it do and has it been effective?

Primarily, parent induction provides a framework to clarify the school's position on the absolute truths of God's Word. It also provides an opportunity to welcome new families into the school and introduce them to a strong community and caring culture. There is nothing more overwhelming and moving than to see participants prompted back into their faith roots, engage afresh with their lost or muted faith, or hear someone from another faith background say, "I've never heard this story before, and it makes sense!"

Yet, even if most people don't have a 'born-again' feeling after the course, its main aim remains to provide a basic snapshot of the non-negotiables of the Christian school. If it is not to proselytise, it is to point out that the curriculum that their children will be taught is marinated in God's story. Every attendee must be left with no doubt that the Christian teachers, and staff, adhere to a gospel-informed pedagogy. There is no dualism. Critical thinking is taught through the lens of biblical truths.

They should also experience the strong sense of belonging that Christian community offers them and their children. Parents should never be surprised that their children pray at school or read the Bible in class. They must be aware that, apart from everything else, the school may have celebration services and sing gospel songs. They should know that the school, at times, will challenge the students in their journey to grow in faith. The course should leave no doubt that the school they have chosen for their child subjects everything to the Lordship of Christ and trusts a living and sovereign God that rules and reigns over all of life. Parent induction should ultimately cater to the broad church by pointing people to the redemptive work of Christ and the glorious Kingdom of God.

As a follow-up to the induction, we provide access to a register of people, buddy families, and churches that participants can seek out for further assistance, connection, and community.

Those who said they would attend, but never did honour their commitment, are called back in for a second (accountability) interview. This call-up should not come as a surprise to them.

For anyone interested in what our course looks like please feel free to contact me. Since we developed this from many different sources, it is not ours to keep. We are keen to share with other schools and hope they develop it in their own school context.

Discussion Questions

1. To what degree is your school 'open'? How is this managed?
2. View your school's vision and mission statement. To what extent does evangelism of 'un-churched' families fit with the vision and mission?
3. If your school were to develop a parent induction course, what would be some of the key ideas and discussion that you would want to see explored in the material? What would your "snapshot of the non-negotiables" be?
4. Besides the enrolment interview and an induction course, what might be some of the other ways that parents and families could be 'inducted' into the vision and community of the school?
5. Can you foresee any downsides to the implementation of a mandatory parent induction course for all new parents and families?

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