



EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Recovering the Christian Virtue

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December 2021

CARDUS *Perspectives*

 KUYERS INSTITUTE
FOR CHRISTIAN TEACHING AND LEARNING

This paper was first delivered on October 2, 2015, at the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning conference, “Faith and Teaching: Virtue, Practice, Imagination,” at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The text has been lightly adapted to appear for publication.

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How to Cite

Green, Beth, and Doug Sikkema. “Excellence in Education: Recovering the Christian Virtue.” Cardus, 2021. <https://cardus.ca/research/education/reports/excellence-in-education>.



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Executive Summary

Education is a conversation between the generations about what it means to be human. This paper traces this conversation from its Greco-Roman and early Christian roots to the present—looking at how the Christian notion has shifted our conception of excellence in important ways, but how we have perhaps lost a fully rounded vision of it in our late modern world. We also present some of the data from the Cardus Education Survey, in order to begin mapping possible ways in which excellence is understood—arguing that Christian schools, at present, typically settle for either adopting the dominant discourse of excellence uncritically or eschewing it completely. Finally, we proffer one possible approach to rewarding teacher excellence in Christian education.

In short, excellence is not abstract. In this paper we map the ways in which excellence has been understood partly to act as a reminder that there was life before the Enlightenment, but also to argue that excellence as a virtue encompasses three important components. First, *telos*: excellence is always *for* something. Second, *character*: skills and knowledge are to be exercised wisely. And third, *Christian framework*: excellence is always grounded in the pre-existing character of the Creator.

By contrast, a brief review of the literature suggests that there are broadly two ways in which contemporary discourse understands teacher excellence; one rests heavily on systems theory, the other on developing reflexive practice. Interestingly, both of these approaches emphasize a mastery of competence and skill, and both are heavily oriented toward individual performance rather than a broader conception of the common good. Also, neither considers the significance of character or the wise application of knowledge.

In conclusion, excellence is always relative to context and embedded in practice. We have made the mistake in education of attempting to engage with and measure an abstract principle, instead of recognizing that without critical reflection we are importing a whole set of assumptions about what education is for—and, implicitly, who the person is. Christian educators need to talk about what education is for: They need a story and a set of practices guided by the Christian story, as it is lived within committed faithful community. Only then is measurement possible and, as we have argued, is it possible to have a set of robust and successful outcomes nested within the Christian *telos*. Ongoing reflection, evaluation, and dissemination of excellence awards builds the standard of excellence within the Christian school community and offers this as a contribution to the common good.



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Introduction

During a recent Uber ride, I (Beth) learned that Kevin, my driver, had an excellent teacher he still remembered. His science teacher had put Cheerios in a blender, added water, and poured the mixture through a bottle over a magnet. Two hours later, an iron pellet was visible. Kevin could still remember how he and his classmates felt: “Whoa, there’s iron in our breakfast cereal! That’s cool.” Kevin also told me about a less positive experience from a science lesson in his religious school: various liquids were added to a beaker, and as it got progressively darker the students were told that this was an illustration of what sin does to the soul. I asked Kevin how this made him feel, and he admitted that he felt pretty torn up: “I used to be a Christian,” said Kevin, “but now I am a pagan.” Of course, the science lesson wasn’t the reason Kevin made that journey, but as the Cardus Education Survey tells us, Christian schools do have an impact on how students go on to live out their faith.

Kevin could recognize the excellent teaching and learning practice that helped him learn and the destructive one that he had been hurt by. It seems that most of us have something in mind when we think about “excellence,” but just what does this elusive term mean? Excellence is a buzzword in education. It is sought after for students and teachers and school communities. Educators strive for it and want to form it in others. But the question persists: What do we mean by excellence, and how are we to foster it?

Kevin told me he had not entirely seen the point of getting an education but that now he liked to learn things. He said to me, “Surely the best way to learn about anything is to talk about it.” And he illustrated this during the Uber ride. “So, this is your first time using Uber, right?” he asked. “To learn about how it works, you should just ask me questions, and I will tell you about it.” Kevin has probably never heard of the educational philosopher Michael Oakeshott, but Oakeshott said essentially the same thing: education is a conversation between the generations about what it means to be human.¹ Kevin understood this intuitively.

The conversation that has been taking place about excellence in education is indeed a long and complex one, and our hope in this paper is to briefly trace an outline of the roots of excellence in Greco-Roman and early Christian thought. Specifically, the paper will look at how the Christian notion shifted the classical conception of excellence in important ways, and how we have perhaps lost a fully rounded Christian vision of it in our late modern world. The paper will also present some of the data from the Cardus Education Survey, in order to demonstrate this loss—arguing that Christian schools tend to either adopt the dominant discourse of excellence uncritically or eschew it completely. Finally, the paper proffers one possible approach to rewarding teacher excellence in Christian education.

1 M. Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

The Greco-Roman Roots of Excellence

Tracing Western education back to its classical roots reveals that education has almost always been associated with a striving after excellence—what the Greeks termed *arete*. In his landmark study of the period, Henri-Irénée Marrou defines *arete* as “the ideal value to which even life itself must be sacrificed.”² For the ancient Greeks, *arete* was tied to effectiveness: How well could a person develop and use all the resources available to them for maximum results? As Marrou notes, this concept assumed a human-centred world, where human actions are of ultimate importance. So, the first key point is that excellence is not abstract; it is connected to human action, oriented toward what is valued, and related directly to what one believes education is for.

By the fifth century BC, educating young men to be influential in the burgeoning political body of the polis—a body of citizens democratically governed—was the ultimate purpose, or telos, of education.³ And so an excellent education trained an elite in the techniques necessary to persuade others through the powers of rhetoric. This gave rise to the Sophists who, for money, could train young aristocrats in this *techne*, or art.

Socrates challenged the idea that education was merely for the attainment of some “technique” or skill, whether that be in war or in words, which would lead to the necessary power and influence to govern the state or become an elite. You could argue that Socrates was the first one to say that good education did not conceive of excellence, or *arete*, merely in its external, public function. Rather, as Richard Gamble points out, for Socrates and Plato, “education is properly understood as the care and perfection of the soul. Excellence (*arete*) is not primarily excellence of skill, but excellence of virtue.”⁴ This understanding of education marks the beginning of a turn inward, which signalled an important change in how excellence was imagined. Excellence was not merely tied to competence in speaking and acting, but also to the inward workings of character and the cultivation of wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice *within* a person.

In Plato’s formulation, excellence becomes highly intellectual. It is not a skill but a pursuit of the right way of thinking and judging—one that is dialogical and thus dependent on others in society. Indeed, the entire *Republic* is an extended argument that the ideal, transformed polis is only fitly ruled by someone (a philosopher) who has been inwardly transformed first. For Plato, the philosopher-ruler is capable of ruling only due to a rigorous, formational education. We are not advocating for the kind of education that Plato lays out in the *Republic*, but the second key point is that the formation of character (*paideia*) matters a great deal in such an education. *Paideia*, excellence in education, is also about using knowledge and skills wisely.

2 H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. G. Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), 10.

3 Sparta notwithstanding.

4 R.M. Gamble, introduction to Plato, in *The Great Tradition*, ed. R.M. Gamble (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2007), 3.



The Christian Shift

Christians from the earliest times have had conflicting attitudes about how to deal with the classical intellectual heritage. Some, like Tertullian, advocated a sharp rift between “Athens” (Greek philosophy) and “Jerusalem” (Judeo-Christian religion), while others, like Augustine, believed one could still see the goodness of the “gold of the Egyptians” without fashioning it into an idol. In his short primer for Christian elders, *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine encourages Christians to boldly take the treasures of the pagans:

If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have said things which are indeed true and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as from unjust possessors and converted to our use. Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also, they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to a better use.⁵

In terms of understanding excellence, the transition from the Greco-Roman world to the Christian world witnessed a subtle shift, particularly as it related to the New Testament focus on virtue and the fruit of the Spirit. Early Christians not only converted from paganism but also converted key philosophical and educational concepts along the way, putting this pagan gold to better use.

When *arete* appears in the New Testament, English translations usually use “moral excellence” or “virtue.” For example, the NIV translates Philippians 4:8 as follows: “Whatever is true...noble...right...pure...lovely...admirable—if anything is *excellent* or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Clearly, the writers in the New

5 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), 75.

Testament, Paul particularly, think of excellence in moral and spiritual terms, with its perfect manifestations found in God’s character—and most clearly articulated as the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23). Indeed, the most significant shift in thinking, demonstrated in Augustine’s treatment of excellence in his *Confessions*, is that the formation of human excellence is always grounded in the pre-existing excellence of the Creator. Excellence that is not rooted in God’s character is idolatrous.

Contemporary Discourse of Excellence in Teaching

A brief review of the literature suggests that there are broadly two ways in which teacher excellence is commonly understood by educational commentators today: one rests heavily on systems theory, the other on developing reflexive practice. Interestingly, both of these approaches emphasize a mastery of competence and skill, and both are heavily oriented toward individual performance rather than toward a broader conception of the public or common good. Also, neither takes into account the significance of character or the wise application of knowledge.

A systems approach to improving standards in education focuses almost exclusively on inputs and outputs.⁶ Teacher excellence in this model is posited very narrowly because it focuses almost exclusively on student outputs, primarily measured in terms of achievement on a standardized test. In such a model, excellence in teaching and learning can be understood only in relation to inputs that can be directly measured by their effect on academic outcomes. An example of one such output would be covering the syllabus. The attempt to identify the teaching and learning practices associated with good academic outcomes and to disseminate them is laudable. Indeed, teachers and education systems should be held accountable for student outcomes, and it is not unreasonable, at first glance, to define teacher excellence as that which promotes good academic outcomes.

However, there are three main problems with uncritically adopting this model and defining teacher excellence this way. The first problem is that little to no account is taken of the relational or affective domain associated with teaching and learning—the focus is primarily cognitive. Second, the broader socioeconomic and religious contexts in which teaching is located are not deemed to be important. (Ball and Green all discuss at length, elsewhere, why this is deeply problematic.⁷) In effect, this model functions as an educational assembly line that promotes homogenous teaching and learning techniques focused almost exclusively on covering curriculum content. Collaboration, innovation, and risk-taking are not rewarded in systems

6 C. Teddlie and S. Stringfield, *Schools Make a Difference: Lesson Learned from a 10-Year Study of School Effects* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

7 S. Ball, *The Education Debate*, 2nd ed. (Bristol: Policy Press, 2013); E. Green, “Analysing Religion and Education in Christian Academies,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 33, no. 3 (2012): 391–407.

that exclusively measure academic outputs—particularly when attainment is defined purely in terms of one mode of testing. The third consequence of defining excellence in terms only of academic performance is perhaps unintended but significant nonetheless. Narrow performance models encourage teachers to teach to the test, and discourage them from using any teaching and learning practices that go beyond the transmission of factual knowledge.

The latest research into teaching and learning demonstrates the centrality of the affective domain, showing that learning also requires engagement with practice.⁸ Contemporary teacher-education and professional-development models in Europe and in North America have ostensibly embraced what is commonly referred to as a “reflexive practice” model. These approaches tend to affirm greater innovation in teaching and learning strategies, problem solving, and collaboration in which the learner has greater autonomy.⁹ In this model, teacher excellence tends to be associated with the development of personal characteristics of the learner. It assumes that an excellent teacher is one who has the skills to develop “positive relationships with all students.”¹⁰ While this model engages with a more sophisticated understanding of how learning happens, a significant qualifier should be made. The reflexive approach still places much emphasis on the individual teacher rather than a full consideration of the complexity of the classroom, which includes the socioeconomic context of the learners, different levels of prior attainment, and their access to stable identity formation. In this failure to attend to the particulars of the students it also tends toward a “competence” model of excellence. This competence model arises because the teacher is still primarily conceptualized as an individual possessing all the necessary personal qualities to achieve excellence in the learner. Qualities understood this way are a priori, not *emergent*. In other words, this theoretical model still does not take fully into account the relational aspect of teaching and learning, the interaction with the learner, and the significance of context in the classroom.

Yet this focus on excellence still doesn’t tackle the larger question: What is education for? Going back to the Greco-Roman and early Christian worlds, one thing that both paradigms shared was an implicit understanding that education had both internal and external dimensions. Internally, education was about the formation of virtues, morals, and, more broadly, character. Externally, education was meant to form citizens and leaders of public life. Ideally, both the internal and external teloi were met. Today, the desire for excellence in both its internal and external dimensions still lingers in educational discourse, but in many ways our schools and communities do not conceive of excellence as fully as they might. Data from the

8 B.M. Jack, H. Lin, and L.D. Yore, “The Synergistic Effect of Affective Factors on Student Learning Outcomes,” *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 51, no. 8 (2014): 1084–1101.

9 M.M. Tyali, “Pupil Participation as an Aspect of Co-operative Ability: Implication for the Management of Teacher Competence” (M.Ed. mini-dissertation, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg, 1996), <http://hdl.handle.net/10210/6471>.

10 A.M.D. Grieve, “Exploring the Characteristics of ‘Teachers for Excellence’: Teachers’ Own Perceptions,” *European Journal of Teacher Education* 33, no. 3 (2010): 265–77.



Cardus Education Survey show that in some ways this less-than-full conception of excellence is particularly true of religious independent schools. James Davison Hunter examines Christian reluctance to seek power and form cultural “elites” as a somewhat admirable trait, and one rooted to good theology. Hunter explains that there is a real tension today between our “desire for” and “fear of” excellence. He asks, Is it possible to “pursue excellence and, under God’s sovereignty, be in a position of influence and privilege and *not* be ensnared by the trappings of elitism?”¹¹ In this paper we argue that teachers and schools should continue to strive after excellence and even continue to measure it, but in ways that are not reductionist. In order to do this better, teachers need to recover a full-orbed vision of excellence.

The Cardus Education Survey

Conceptualizing excellence as a virtue might offer a way to overcome some of the tensions inherent in the common ways of thinking about teacher excellence and to help Christian schools navigate what can be affirmed and what needs to be challenged in the light of Christian understandings of education’s telos. Cardus’s own research is contributing to the revival of a discussion of teacher excellence within the K–12 Christian school community in North America because it insists on measuring wider educational outcomes. These include the academic, spiritual, and cultural characteristics of Christian-school graduates. In this way it is contributing to a growing body of work that argues for the significance of religious belief and practice in the context of learning, and for a better understanding of the impact of schools.¹² While the Cardus survey does not directly investigate teacher excellence, some findings from this research suggest that the way in which Christian schools

11 J.D. Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93–94 (emphasis original).

12 For the origins of this research area, see C. Glenn, *The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-Based Schools and Social Agencies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

engage with the concept of excellence, particularly as it manifests in teaching, might be significant for their ongoing reflection.

Cardus first collected data from nationally representative samples of graduates in Canada and the US in 2010 and 2011.¹³ The study found significant differences between two of the largest religious-school sectors: Catholic and Protestant evangelical. As Ray Pennings and his co-authors summarized in a later report,

Evangelical Protestant (EP) schools excelled in forming spiritual life and faith and building commitment to family and church life, but their academic outcomes fell short of the other sectors. Catholic schools produced much stronger academic outcomes, but efforts to instill faith and spirituality did not manifest in young adulthood.¹⁴

In 2014, Cardus repeated and extended the sphere of study, collecting data about the occupations of Christian-school graduates as adults and their views and practices regarding science and technology.¹⁵ The 2014 findings continue to reveal a significant difference between EP and Catholic schools as it was described in the 2011 report. In addition, they report that the graduates of EP schools focus less on careers in science, technology, engineering, and math than Catholic graduates do. EP graduates value vocational calling heavily and are also more likely than Catholic graduates to choose to work in human-service careers, such as social work, health care, and education. Pennings et al. hypothesize that this difference can partly be accounted for by a different motivation or conception of the purpose of education, particularly since the EP community emphasizes spiritual formation and vocational calling and service more than academic outcomes.

In this paper we have mapped the ways in which excellence has been understood partly to act as a reminder that there was life before the Enlightenment, but also to argue that excellence as a virtue encompasses three important components. First, telos: excellence is always *for* something. Second, character: skills and knowledge are to be exercised wisely. And third, Christian framework: excellence is always grounded in the pre-existing character of the Creator. Interpreting the data with these three components in mind reveals several interesting findings. The echoes of telos and character can be heard within the EP school sector, but there also appears to be a reticence about the external dimension of excellence. This suggests that the formation of leaders and cultural influencers is not seen by all as a legitimate or even as a desirable goal. The results for the Catholic-school sector seem to illuminate an opposite trend, where we find fewer attempts to critique the dominant contemporary discourse of excellence in terms of telos and the character of God.

13 R. Pennings, J. Seel, D. Van Pelt, D. Sikkink, and K. Wiens, "Cardus Education Survey 2011: Do the Motivations for Private Religious Catholic and Protestant Schooling in North America Align with Graduate Outcomes?," Cardus 2011, <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/cardus-education-survey-phase-i-report-2011/>.

14 R. Pennings et al., "Cardus Education Survey 2014: Private Schools for the Public Good," Cardus 2014. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/cardus-education-survey-2014-private-schools-for-the-public-good/>.

15 Pennings et al., "Cardus Education Survey 2014."

Measuring and Rewarding Teacher Excellence in Christian Education

How to define, measure, and reward excellence in Christian education is no longer merely an abstract question. Cardus has co-sponsored the Teacher Excellence Awards in Christian independent schools since 2016.¹⁶ In the remainder of this paper we offer an overview of the elements developed for these awards. First, fundamental to the awards' design is the assumption that the community of Christian schools itself should be given the opportunity to articulate the telos of Christian education and reflect on where current understandings of excellence reside in the schools' existing practice.

Second, teachers are nominated by their communities rather than by applying themselves. The distinction between “nomination” and “application” might seem like a nuance, but it is not. The process of nomination requires a consensus among the members of the community, who recognize that excellence in teaching and learning are contributing to the proper telos of education. This consensus affirms the external domain of excellence as a practice because it focuses on the contribution made to the whole community. This will of course include evidence of academic outcomes, innovative pedagogy, collaborative method, and use of technology, to name several criteria typically applied to excellent teaching and learning and ubiquitous within the literature. The critical point is that the awards criteria do not reduce excellence in teaching and learning to the performance of these techniques.

First, telos: excellence is always for something. Second, character: skills and knowledge are to be exercised wisely. And third, Christian framework: excellence is always grounded in the pre-existing character of the Creator.

The criteria of the awards require evidence not merely of outcomes for their own sake but also demonstration of growth—that is, a teacher must show evidence of increasing ability to articulate how Christian faith, rigorous scholarship, key skills (functional and innovative), and the formation of character all contribute to excellent teaching and learning. Evidence is required that this holistic understanding of education is built intentionally into the complexity of the classroom. Evidence includes results, but it also requires testimony about how the Christian faith, rigorous scholarship, key skills, and the formation of character affect student learning and contribute to the professional

learning of teachers and the formation of the school community. These are high goals, and the assumption of the awards is not that one teacher or a team of teachers will have attained all of them, but that they are pressing forward and keeping one another and the school community accountable for achieving excellence: in this, the sponsors

16 See Teacher Excellence Awards, www.TeacherExcellenceAward.com.

of the awards believe they should be affirmed, rewarded, and spurred on. The awards panel therefore looks for evidence that a teacher demonstrates excellence in all of the following categories: purpose in teaching and learning, rigour, and service of the common good.

Nominations must provide evidence that the teacher can clearly articulate the core values, ethos, or mission statement of the Christian school and embodies it in their professional practice, integrating it into curriculum planning, assessment, and management of classroom relationships. In particular, the panel expects to see evidence of strong worldview literacy or an informed philosophy of education that integrates Christian faith and learning, and that speaks to purpose or telos in teaching and learning. Rigour requires that teachers regularly capture evidence of pupil attainment, progress, and character development and that this is used to inform curriculum planning, assessment, and management of classroom relationships. In particular, the panel expects to see evidence that the teacher takes into consideration and measures the academic, vocational, civic, and social outcomes of graduates. With regard to the criterion of service, the nomination must provide evidence that teachers are prepared, through their own professional practice, to foster a classroom culture where risk-taking, collaboration, creativity, and responsibility for learning are not only maximizing the gifts of individual students but also offered for the good of the community. “Community” could be understood here in many ways but is likely to refer to the class, the school, the church, and the neighbourhood. In particular, the panel expects to see evidence that teachers are preparing students to engage in culture beyond the school via their character formation, knowledge, and vocation.

Finally, the nature of the awards matters because to incentivize particular outcomes with a cash bonus, a common model of prizes, would be to reorient the focus of excellence back to an internal motivation for action. This takes us away from telos and reverts to the individual as the arbiter of action. In fact, the choice of language is itself significant here. To talk about awards rather than prizes is to deliberately choose to use the construction of practice as a frame of reference, rather than to evoke behaviourist conceptions of incentivizing techniques or competencies. The hope is that the awards facilitate greater opportunities for recipients to reflect on their teaching and learning, and to build further on what has already been recognized as excellent—but also to take responsibility for advocating those practices as a contribution to the practice of professionalism within Christian education.

Conclusion

In this paper we have traced some of the intellectual history of the concept of excellence, to illustrate that it has not traditionally been conceived as an abstract principle; rather, it is always relative to context and embedded in practice. Education has made the mistake of attempting to engage with and measure an abstract principle, instead of recognizing that without critical reflection we are importing a whole set of assumptions about what education is for—and, implicitly, who the person is. Christian educators need to talk about what education is for. They need a story and a set of practices guided by the Christian story, as it is lived within committed faithful community. Only then is measurement possible and, as we have argued, is it possible to have a set of robust and successful outcomes nested within the Christian telos. Ongoing reflection, evaluation, and dissemination of excellence awards builds the standard of excellence within the Christian school community and offers this excellence as a contribution to the common good.

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