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in Christian Education

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A Case Study *of*
Surrey Christian School

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ABOUT CARDUS

Cardus is a non-partisan, faith-based think tank and registered charity dedicated to promoting a flourishing society through independent research, robust public dialogue, and thought-provoking commentary.

Christian Schools and Civic Engagement

Given the questions being posed about public funding for independent schools nationwide, it is important for non-government schools to demonstrate how the surrounding community benefits from the existence of an independent school (Van Pelt, Hassan, and Allison 2017). A school community needs to collaborate with all key partners—parents, school boards, churches invested in the school, and local government authorities in particular—if they wish to engage effectively with public community life.

The faith embodied in Christian schools gives these institutions a unique and powerful motivation to engage with their neighbours. Their commitment to the gospel message drives them to respond with charitable action; this calling involves developing students into active citizens who can serve their communities effectively. Recognizing the views and priorities that they share with the world around them, administrators, staff, and students view Christian education as a contributor to the common good. Through their efforts to advance the good of their local and global communities, Christian schools, and the people of faith within them, can be "institutions and communities called to live fully in the times and places where they live, indeed [they] are shaped by them" (Green 2019, 10).

Making Connections and Discoveries at All Grade Levels

Students of all grade levels take part in Surrey Christian's local and global initiatives. Kindergarten and other elementary classes help care for a local park. Grade 3 students visited the Ocean Legacy Foundation, a

Surrey Christian School - Primary Campus, Surrey, British Columbia

> "The need that teachers feel to 'cover the material' is the primary barrier to engaging with the community in their courses. Community engagement usually involves more time and a bit more 'messiness,' particularly in the area of assessment, so teachers need to see the connection to this kind of learning and their 'job' as a teacher."

School Profile

Name of school: Surrey Christian School

Type of school: Christian independent school

Grade Range of Students: preschool–grade 12

Number of Students: 1,340

Number of Staff: 175

Location: Surrey, British Columbia

School's mission statement:
"Educating for wholeness, by engaging God's world in the servant way of Jesus" (Surrey Christian School 2019).

> "It takes time to plan and prepare. Because civic engagement is important work, we need to do it well, and doing things well takes time. Teachers need opportunities for regular collaboration, scheduling, and planning built into their schedule."

Class 4V's food hamper program

local non-profit focused on reducing plastic pollution around coastlines, to learn about the biodiversity of tide-pool ecosystems. One of the teachers involved in the trip highlighted the students' enthusiasm following the experience: many of them suggested that the next year's grade 3 class be taken to visit the Ocean Legacy Foundation as well. Every couple of weeks grade 5 students assist with sorting and distribution at a nearby food bank. This experience has helped students to recognize their biases and challenged their stereotypes by fostering an increased appreciation for the dignity of all people through connection and service. Grade 5 students also host and meet monthly with refugee families in order to deepen their understanding of the idea of "community."

Students in grades 6 and 7 have worked with municipal authorities to build benches in the City of Surrey. Not only did students benefit from this project by practicing professional communication skills, but the community

Methodology

The researchers visited the school in November 2018. After learning about the project, staff participated in an online survey focused on civic engagement; a focus group of six staff members discussed their responses to the survey questions in more depth. The researchers also interviewed the five members of the school's administrative leadership team. The researchers were given a tour of the school, spoke with students, and visited classrooms to observe classroom-based civic-engagement projects.

Appreciative Inquiry

This research was guided by an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, which focuses on the strengths of individuals and their organizations (Stavros, Godwin, and Cooperrider 2015, 97). AI is often used in school-based research (Bergmark and Kostenius 2018; Calabrese 2015; Gordon 2016; Tittle 2018; Waters and White 2015; Zepeda and Ponticell 2018). According to Ryan and colleagues (1999, 164–65), AI is effective because it "can be used to guide school reform within any school community—public or private, from the elementary through the secondary level" and assesses "the positive dimensions of a school's culture, while simultaneously providing qualitative data that could help administrators and teachers." By emphasizing strengths rather than problems in schools, AI can avoid de-energizing teachers, staff, and administrators (Ryan et al. 1999, 167).

also benefited from improved public spaces. Students are proud of their work because they believe it matters to others. One teacher reported that the quality of student work improves because of the connection to the "real world." Also, connecting with local community organizations can often be very easy when they share the same neighbourhood or similar goals. Physical- and health-education students, for example, have used projects such as planning cooperative games and exercise opportunities as ways to build positive relationships with their neighbours.

Civic engagement is also emphasized at the high-school level. Surrey Christian secondary students are regularly involved at the public school as well, helping to teach physical-education classes, tutoring other students, making props for their musicals, and coordinating an inter-school sports program. Students in grade 11 biology work in a local fish hatchery. The photo and information-technology classes use their learning to help others by building websites for non-profit organizations in the community. Surrey Christian also participates in an exchange program with one of British Columbia's First Nations schools; students visit the reserve in Witset (approximately 700 kilometres north of Surrey) and learn from Indigenous students about their culture and way of being.

Other civic-engagement initiatives that teachers have planned for their students include visiting a local seniors' home twice a month, holding a bake sale to raise money for mosquito nets in Africa, evaluating the accessibility of local businesses and posting the reviews online, and offering computer literacy and English-conversation classes to refugee families. Students learn about other religions through fostering buddy relationships with a class in a local Sikh academy and attending interfaith events. These

"I think there's a significant mind-shift that needs to take place [in any school looking to increase its civic engagement], that the leadership would have to believe and be invested in. School is not preparing students for life—school is life. Students are working on gaining knowledge/skills/character in order to make a difference in the world when they graduate—students play a role in restoring creation now."

Students visit a fish hatchery

activities can be used as a community-focused variation on more conventional projects, as one teacher explains: "While reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, my students study a modern-day injustice. They read about it in the news for a few weeks. In the end, instead of writing a traditional research paper about it, they write a letter to one of their politicians explaining the issue and suggesting specific actions that the government can take." Through civic engagement, students get a sense of meaningful work, increase their awareness of the "other" and real-world issues, evaluate personal biases, increase their motivation, and learn practical skills.

A few times a year, teachers and administrators from other schools across North America visit Surrey Christian for professional-learning conversations about the work of civic engagement and teaching for transformation. The leadership team is also involved in planning a conference in which principals participate in discussion about civic engagement.

The Importance of Leadership and Professional Development

Professional development is an important component of Surrey Christian's culture of civic engagement. The director of learning, whose responsibilities include ensuring that Surrey Christian's curriculum design and pedagogy allow initiatives to be sustained over time, plays a significant role

> "Be open-minded, I suppose, and be willing to have your ideas not work out. I've tried two different outreach opportunities in the last six months, and we cancelled both times because it felt like our outreach was placing more of a burden on the organization than would be fair and ideal."

in the school's professional-development programs. The school-improvement literature confirms the effectiveness of this type of leadership structure: having a dedicated director of learning in addition to a principal is an example of distributed leadership, which involves a team of educators sharing leadership responsibilities and has been linked to improved student outcomes (Bush and Glover 2012; Leithwood et al. 2007).

The director of learning emphasizes that staff development is an ongoing process: "We will not do one-shot professional development. Rather, it's a continual and

Hands-on learning at a biofuel facility

faithful movement in a direction." This is consistent with the school's focus on ongoing collaboration with community organizations rather than participation in one-off service events. In addition to weekly professional-learning time, Surrey Christian uses a cohort model, in which the director of learning leads a group of approximately twenty-five teachers through an intensive professional-development program each year. Staff members report appreciation for this encouragement: "The admin is very willing to allow for off-site engagement in the world around us and have freed up the resources for us to do that including travel costs and classroom coverage...

> "Everyone needs to be on board with the vision—if not there will be roadblocks. This extends to how communication with the parent community is accomplished. Parents didn't go to school this way so there is a realization that being explicit about what is happening is very important."

The professional learning we get is very rich and relevant."

The leadership of Surrey Christian intentionally seeks to hire staff who are already engaged locally. During the interview process, the administrative team asks questions about job applicants' worldviews and involvement in their communities in order to assess their alignment with the civic-engagement aspect of the school's mission. This focus in recruitment helps the school design learning that involves students in causes about which staff themselves are passionate.

Civic engagement is incorporated into curriculum design as well: "The curriculum framework used for planning asks how students will be involved with the community outside the building walls and how we [as staff] can help students make a positive impact in our community." Teachers are not restricted to a certain curriculum. Surrey Christian has developed specific courses designed to prepare students for intercultural learning experiences, such as visiting international sister schools. The planning tool and process used by all teachers contributes to the expectation that civic engagement is part of the teaching and learning experience at Surrey Christian, rooted in the school's stated core value to "engage God's world."

Lack of time is often identified as a roadblock to school improvement in the research literature (Bryk et al. 2010;

Recording the stories of seniors in the community

Gaynor 2012; Hallinger and Murphy 2013). School leadership, however, has addressed this issue by giving staff release time for planning. Each Friday staff from the elementary and high school, which are on different campuses, come together before school to discuss and plan initiatives as well as share success stories and challenges. Wednesdays include two-and-a-half- to three-hour blocks of time called Mega Blocks, which allow students and staff more time and freedom to get out into the community.

Key Takeaways

1. It is important for schools to continually be asking how they matter to their neighbours in order to identify opportunities to have a positive impact on their communities.

2. Charitable action in response to the gospel and developing active citizens are complementary efforts.

3. Independent schools can work with neighbouring public schools to build connections and positive relationships.

4. Fostering interfaith relationships and welcoming people who live in the community to school events help schools gain a deeper understanding of the surrounding community.

5. Civic engagement can be incorporated into all subjects and motivates students of all grade levels to excel by providing the opportunity to observe the real-world impact of their work.

6. Investing in intensive professional development for a cohort of teachers each year, including built-in accountabilities and commitments, builds teachers' capacity for civic engagement.

7. The potential for misunderstandings and resistance can be mitigated by communicating openly with parents regarding civic-engagement initiatives.

8. Building opportunities for regular collaboration, scheduling, and planning into teachers' schedules gives teachers the time they need to prepare effective civic-engagement programs.

Surrey Christian School - Secondary Campus ,
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