

Pursuing Excellence
in Christian Education

BUILDING COMMUNITY

A Case Study *of*
Woodland Christian High School

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CARDUS



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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.

Building Community in Christian Schools

Research has clearly established the importance of strong, engaging, and supportive community to a school's success. In their study of supportive school communities, Azcoitia and Purinton (2018) highlight the need for schools to build on the strengths of existing resources and stakeholders rather than be overwhelmed by what might be lacking. They also underscore the importance of leaders in this task, which is consistent with the growing body of research indicating that "leadership is the key factor in transforming schools" (Voulalas and Sharpe 2005, 188). Leaders have a strong influence on the extent to which teachers and students feel valuable and relevant to the school culture; as such, a school's leadership is key to making the school a place of belonging. Belonging in turn contributes positively to students' sense of identity.

It is critical that teachers enjoy a sense of belonging at their school as well. Kruse and colleagues (1994) examine factors that contribute to strong professional communities in schools. They list reflective dialogue, de-privatization of teacher practice, a collective focus on student learning, strong collaboration across various aspects of the school community, and a strong sense of shared values. They go on to investigate the ways that schools with strongly supportive communities create positive places of belonging. Their research indicates that teachers need empowerment, autonomy, and communication structures that allow them to meet and talk regularly. Each of these elements requires trust and respect between the leadership, teachers, and students.



Woodland Christian High School

“Our shared mission and vision, and being united by faith, brings strength.”

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The centrality of community to Christian belief and practice cannot be overstated. The foundations of the Christian faith are relationships—God and humanity, the three persons of the Trinity, Christ and his disciples, or the apostles and the churches, to name just a few. Woodland Christian High School is a place where commitment to community is understood as central to living out of the gospel's message of freedom and grace.

School Profile

Name of school: Woodland Christian High School

Type of school: Independent Christian school

Grade Range of Students: Grade 9–12

Number of Students: 345

Number of Staff: 39

Location: Breslau, Ontario

School's mission statement:

“Woodland Christian High School exists to equip our students for lives of Christian faith and service” (Woodland Christian High School 2020).

The Character of Community and Belonging at Woodland Christian High

From its inception, Woodland has sought to be diverse and ecumenical. The school was founded by educators, parents, churches, and community members from the Baptist and Christian Reformed traditions. Today, nineteen churches in the area support the school, and more than fourteen Christian denominations are represented among Woodland's families. Administrators note that its only official statement of faith is the Apostles' Creed. Students come from both rural areas and urban centres and represent families of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. (Many use financial aid to help cover the school's tuition fees.) Woodland has made it a priority to infuse the school experience with Christian virtues of love and acceptance to everyone, a commitment that is lived out in classes and the staff room.



"When I need to get inspired, I just come into the staff room. Or I walk around the school; being here renews me."



"Being invested in the community has a positive impact on school culture."



The empowerment of Woodland's students has played a central role in encouraging their sense of belonging. The student council, for instance, has been given a lot of responsibility at the school to oversee the various clubs and plan large events, many of which bring the whole school together. Students note that the school's commitment to high quality of work and strong relationships with staff are based on a high level of trust: "There is a culture where we are free to make mistakes; we feel like 'owners' of the school," the student council president remarks. Students organize fundraisers to support various charities and the annual educational trips in which each grade participates. These experiences, as well as additional trips to Europe and South America offered to senior students, are embraced and celebrated by the entire community. The student president describes the warmth of the school and the connection the students feel with each other, their teachers, and the school leadership. Woodland's

Methodology

The researcher visited the school in February 2019. After learning about the project, staff participated in an online survey focused on community-building; a focus group of twelve staff members discussed their responses to the survey questions in more depth. The quoted material without citation throughout this profile is drawn from survey responses. The researcher also interviewed the school principal and vice principal. The researcher was given a tour of the school, spoke with students, and visited classrooms to observe classroom-based community-building initiatives.

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).

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“Everyone cares for each other, we respect each other, we openly collaborate and support one another through difficult semesters as well as life events outside of school.”

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community nurtures relationships with parents and members of the broader community as well—music students, for example, give choral performances in neighbouring churches, and parents show strong support for student engagement.

Woodland’s teachers also report feeling supported and empowered. Teachers at Woodland use a variety of pedagogies—something cited by both teachers and administrators as a strength of the school. In addition to traditional teaching methods, Woodland features outdoor classrooms, student-focused (rather than content-focused) teaching, and flipped classrooms (in which instructional content is delivered online and activities traditionally

considered homework are completed in the classroom); teachers feel free to experiment with other modes of delivery as well: “I truly feel like I can be myself and grow in my teaching style.”

Woodland has a large selection of “co-curricular activities, a wide range of electives, and an unusually well-developed student government.” These activities include shop, rock band, worship teams, art programs, drama productions, choir, instrumental ensembles, intramural groups, a board games club, and an award-winning robotics club, among others. Many of these activities garner support from the whole school community. The school’s most recent annual drama production, for example, involved not only theatre students but music students and the school council as well. The event was attended by the board of governors

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“School culture is critical to success—it helps to have a clear vision for the purpose of schooling that is articulated by all.”

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Being together builds community



Strong student leadership is key to a strong school community



“Community helps people own this school, and by that I mean it helps people buy into the culture we are working to create.”



and by parents. Intramural sports and regular chapels are also treated as opportunities for the whole community to connect. Both teachers and students see the abundance of co-curricular options as key to the vibrancy of the school.

Woodland has built opportunities for regular community engagement into its schedule, including shared prayer, a common lunch break for the whole school, and regular chapels and assemblies. Daily staff devotions are a positive experience: “Devotions are every morning, and we love them.” Woodland’s bus system contributes to the sense of community at the school as well. All students are bused in—including from farming communities as far as an hour’s drive north—and the cost of busing is included in tuition. In addition to traditional morning and afternoon buses, Woodland offers a late bus that leaves the school around six in the evening; this arrangement makes it easier for students (and their parents) who want to participate in

after-school programs, since they do not have to arrange their own transportation. The decision to make busing universal and include the cost as part of tuition followed several years of conversations among administrators. The buses are now widely viewed as central to the school culture and a unifying force in the student body.

Some teachers cite the school’s rural location as having a positive effect on community life. They note that the school is far away from “mall culture”: students stay on campus all day once they arrive, with few leaving the school for lunch or spare/study periods. Both students and teachers report enjoying various activities in the school’s tranquil surroundings, including going for walks in the nearby fields or forest, running scavenger hunts, having classes outdoors, sitting near the fire pit in the yard, playing sports on the soccer field, and simply appreciating the pastoral beauty that can be found outside every window.

Fostering a sense of home was a common theme in survey and interview responses. The administrators say that they “want all students to feel at home here.” Some of the teachers attended Woodland as high-school students themselves and explain that “it has always felt like home.” They feel a deep connection with the school as central to their lives as learners, as professionals, and as Christians

in community with each other. Teachers agree that the strong sense of community at Woodland is what they enjoy most about working at the school. Each expresses strong attachment to the school and the sense of family they feel in their relationships with their students, the administration, parents, and their fellow teachers: “I am most thankful for my colleagues, who are like a second family to me.” Both teachers and administrators emphasize that Woodland is “not a product; it’s a community.”

Listening to the Voices of Teachers, Students, and Administrators

Teachers at Woodland link the task of relating well to their students to the school’s motto: “Enfolding, Engaging, and Equipping” (Woodland Christian High School 2020). Staff members note that they seek to “enfold” in large part because they feel enfolded by the school community themselves. It is this sense of belonging that fuels their efforts to make students feel connected with the school, engage them in meaningful learning experiences, deepen their faith, and prepare them for post-secondary education and their lives beyond. Connecting with students gives teachers a sense of fulfillment in their work: “My students energize me and give me joy and purpose.” One teacher describes the community as a “buzz” of activity, saying, “Our school thrives on the close connectedness and relationships that we have with each other.” Another teacher comments, “My students are energetic, enthusiastic, and (for the most part) positive. We like each other and enjoy being together.”

Woodland’s rural location has not hindered its community-building efforts. At least to some extent, the school’s location influences the community and some of the ways that it comes together: “Being in the country forces us to build relationships. For example, most students eat lunch at school. We really come to know each other.” Teachers appreciate having students from both country and city backgrounds in their classes as well. Yet this does not mean that urban schools are at a disadvantage when it comes to cultivating a vibrant community. While some of Woodland’s teachers see location as very meaningful in how they connect with the

school community, their students, and their curriculum choices, other staff members do not view location itself as central to their relationship with the school. The principal likewise agrees that the rural location contributes to the school community but emphasizes other factors—particularly the structural supports he has committed to maintaining—as far more significant.

Students and staff alike express deep gratitude for the positive and supportive character of Woodland’s community—“the most positive community I’ve ever been a part of,” one teacher emphasizes. This healthy community strengthens and is strengthened by a culture of fun and “a self-perpetuating sense of joy,” supportive parents, accessible leadership that teachers describe as “excellent—effective and responsible,” and profound, long-lasting relationships between students and teachers.

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“My students bring me great joy. I laugh with my colleagues. I am inspired by my work with teachers in my [professional learning]—we share ideas and strengthen our curriculum.”

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Art is a dynamic part of the school community



Student Services has a well-equipped office that includes offices for the student leadership team

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By providing support, encouragement, and a place where mistakes can be made, students can learn what it means to lead others.”

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The teachers view their school as nourishing, with a large majority of survey respondents reporting that they almost always feel fulfilled in their work.

The commitment of Woodland’s leadership has been crucial to building and maintaining this positive community. While expectations of school life inevitably vary widely from one member of the school community to the next, Woodland’s leadership has cultivated a shared sense of mission to foster common ground among teachers, parents, and students. The principal emphasizes that building a strong and nourishing school community is his

top priority. His dedication to creating a warm, affirming school culture has paid off greatly, benefiting both teachers and students: one staff member reports that the “intentional building of positive culture among the staff by the leadership influences students through the classroom environment that results from a positive school culture.” There is a strong sense of support from parents and a strong sense of the positive values at the school. The vice principal remarks, “We hear over and over again from individuals who come into our building that there is something tangibly different about Woodland. Our students speak openly about how much they love their school.”

Key Takeaways

1. Since the diverse members of Christian schools’ communities are united by their commitment to a shared faith, differences within these communities—such as background (e.g., urban, rural) or denomination (e.g., Reformed, Baptist)—can be a unique source of strength.
2. Empowering both students and teachers to try new initiatives, including the freedom to make mistakes, is key to creating a supportive school community.
3. When the norm is for most students to stay at the school throughout the day—when most or all students are bused in, for instance—there are more opportunities to build community through organized programs and informal gatherings.
4. Building a strong school community requires a committed leader or leadership team dedicated to creating and sustaining a sense of belonging for both staff and students.
5. A positive organizational culture and sense of belonging among staff results in substantial benefits for students.

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