

# Why Christian High School? ...a view from a Christian educator

Almost all Christian parents have the following dreams for their high school students:

- a more vibrant relationship with Christ at 12<sup>th</sup> grade than at 8<sup>th</sup> grade,
- healthy social relationships (be part of a group of friends; experience fewer temptations toward drugs, drinking, and illicit sex),
- develop and learn how to defend an authentic faith,
- participate in activities that interest them, and
- be prepared to successfully handle the next level of learning.

Almost as many parents also want their children to learn about and begin to practice Christian stewardship and good citizenship, and to learn to be able to discern what is really bad and really good in the larger culture.

Here are some of the questions parents must ask themselves as they decide about a high school for their child/children.

☒ **Christian School or Non-Christian School:** Is an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Christ-centered education enough for our son or daughter to achieve what we devoutly wish for him or her? Stated another way, would a Christian high school education more likely lead to our desired outcomes than if he/she were in a public school?

☒ **Size of High School:** The Gates Foundation website lists research studies that show students in smaller high schools achieve academically better than students in large schools, are more likely to have adult mentors, are more involved in the school, and more. Based on this research, the Foundation has poured millions into starting small high schools or breaking up large high schools into schools-within-schools. The take-home lesson is that small trumps big, even though large schools have more opportunities in courses, activities, and sports.

☒ **Opportunity and Participation.** Related to the previous point, students and their parents want not only to have the chance to play volleyball or join the chemistry club but also to be chosen for all activities. The truth is that the bigger the school, the more the variety of opportunity but the less participation by percentage. Suppose your child wants to play soccer in high school. Anyone can try out at both a small and large school. The chances are, unless your child is a star (in fact, not wish!), your child will participate less in a large school.

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☒ **Being a Witness.** Some parents wish for their children to “stand tall” as a witness in a public school rather than continue to have their minds and souls nourished in a Christian high school. Some use the analogy of getting out of the greenhouse and getting stronger by flowering in the world without so much the protection. Research shows, however, that this simply does not typically happen. Three good books, *Another Planet*, *A Tribe Apart*, and *Wonderland*, all describe a year in the life of a typical suburban large public high school. In all three accounts, the peer pressure within and outside the schools is dominantly detrimental; in all three books Christian young people find fellowship together in small enclaves, like Amish communities, left alone and occasionally mocked. The evangelical kids do not hobnob with those who do not know God and thus, do not “stand tall” as Christians in a broken world.

☒ **Academics.** Every parent wants his or her son or daughter prepared academically to handle the next level of education. Today, without some postsecondary education, students won’t get the skilled jobs that are becoming almost the only good jobs available. But the way to judge a high school’s prowess in helping *your* child achieve at the next level is *not* how many AP courses a school offers, how much bragging you read in a school’s “come-on” brochures, where *other* children educated at that school have gone to college, or even a school’s average ACT profile. The crucial measure of a high school’s academic program, in the end, can ONLY be what percentage of a high school’s 9<sup>th</sup>-graders *complete* college. An even finer measure is to ask the high school what the average GPA was last year for their graduates at the end of their freshmen year at two- or four-year colleges compared to their average GPA while in that high school. Unfortunately, most high schools do not collect or report these kinds of data. However, it is important to understand that the typical measures used to compare high schools may not, in the end, be all that meaningful or relevant to the decision that you need to make for your unique child.

☒ **Enough’s Enough.** When is church/home/school faith-nurture enough? Probably never. Some see 8<sup>th</sup> grade as enough; others don’t think 12<sup>th</sup> grade is enough and will encourage their child to choose a Christian college. Two factors may help you decide. Hardly anyone disputes that the agencies of strongest influence in a high school student’s life are the electronic media he or she consumes (not the devices, but the messages implicit and explicit in ads, shows, and lyrics) and the friends that he or she associates with. We all recognize that most media messages are counter to what Christian parents want as an outcome at 12<sup>th</sup> grade. And sociologists agree that the home and church are fading institutions of faith nurture. Young people have more freedom, more choice, and less attention than in previous years. How important is a Christian high school in this environment?

--Dan Vander Ark, former Executive Director,  
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