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Faith, Learning, and Success in Mennonite High Schools: What's Working at Bethany Christian High School?

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by Ginny Birky, PhD

Introduction to Research Project

Background: During the 2014-2015 academic school year, I was on sabbatical leave from my work as a professor of education at George Fox University. The story that follows is a result of the sabbatical project I initiated with Mennonite Education Agency/Mennonite Schools Council and seven Mennonite high schools.

About the research: For this post-doctoral research, I personally visited seven Mennonite high schools in the fall of 2014 to determine the strengths and distinctives of the school related to school atmosphere, academics, and faith development. I visited Bethany Christian High School on October 7, 2014 and interviewed 18 participants: 11 students, four teachers, two parents, and one administrator. Some of the teachers and parents represented more than one role, but were to speak from the identified role as much as possible. The overarching interview question was: "What are the strengths and successes at Bethany Christian High School?" Participants gave written consent to have their comments shared. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify recurring themes. I used the themes to organize the information into a story, explaining the themes with quotations, explanations, and examples.

Story or report: The story about Bethany Christian High School (BCHS) was written based on the perceptions and representations of what the participants said related to what was working and why. Every effort was made to portray the perspectives of those interviewed to get an accurate picture of what BCHS was doing to help students be successful, engaged in school, and develop a faith.

Emergent themes. There were many similarities between the selected Mennonite high schools. They had similar values, courses, and clientele. The strengths mentioned at one school were often mentioned at other schools. However, as is true for qualitative research, the data analysis was always organic, so the themes emerged as I immersed myself in the story-telling. Because of similarities between schools, it is important to remember the absence of a theme, quality, or characteristic does not necessarily mean it was absent at the school.

Limitations and disclaimers: It is also important to understand a limitation of the study. I interviewed only a representative sampling of persons from each stakeholder group. Participants spoke for themselves, so the narrative is representative of the participants' perspectives, and does not necessarily represent all perspectives at the particular school. Also, each school's story should be read as one that stands alone rather than used as a basis of comparison to other schools. Each story mentions the names of the people I interviewed. The first time they were mentioned I included the group they represented (student, teacher, parent, or administrator). I intentionally did not use the names of other persons at the school who may have been mentioned by the persons interviewed.

I hope you enjoy reading about the excellent Mennonite high schools I visited. Our Mennonite high schools are strong in the areas of community, academic excellence, and faith integration.

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Faith, Learning, and Success in Mennonite High Schools: What's Working at Bethany Christian High School?

"Learning that lasts. Faith that lives."

Bethany Christian High School was founded in 1954 and is owned by the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference. It is located at the edge of Goshen, Indiana in the north central area of the state and is accredited by Indiana's Department of Education and North Central Association of AdvancEd (<http://www.bethanycs.net/foundation/accreditation>).



The high school at Bethany serves approximately 150 students in grades 9-12. The student body includes over 29% from ethnically diverse or non-white backgrounds; approximately 5% of the total are international students. Students come from a wide variety of church denominations and faith backgrounds. 66% of the high school students are from an Anabaptist tradition.

Students at Bethany Christian Schools (grades 4-12) are supported by approximately 26 faculty members, 21 staff, six administrators, and 27 others that include coaches and adjunct faculty. A Head of School, principal, and guidance counselor oversee the entire Bethany system.

Mission

Bethany Christian Schools is a dynamic learning community that integrates faith development with academic excellence. Grounded in Mennonite values, Bethany equips students for Christian discipleship in the church and around the world.



Bethany Christian High School
2904 South Main Street
Goshen, Indiana 46526
Head of School: Allan Dueck
Interim Head of School: Jim Buller
Principal: Hank Willems
<http://www.bethanycs.net/>



*Left: Allan Dueck, Head of School;
Right: Hank Willems, Principal*

The following pages describe the themes that emerged from interviews with students, teachers, parents, and administrators and from an analysis of the recorded and transcribed interviews.

Significant Strengths: What's Working at BCHS?

The most significant strengths of BCHS highlighted by the participants of this study were related to their *positive feelings about the school, holistic mentoring, and faith development*. This report is organized around the description of these themes.

Positive feelings: "I love it here..."

While parents and siblings influenced their decision to attend Bethany Christian High School, three students said almost in unison, "It's most definitely been the right decision! I love it here!" Other students expressed similar comments. One said, "I didn't really want to come here, but my parents kind of forced me to come my freshman year. And now I love it." Another had a similar experience: "At first I wasn't too thrilled about it, but once I got here, I really liked it." Parents believed their children had wonderful experiences at Bethany. And a teacher stated, "It's easy for me to be positive about Bethany. It's been a great place for me."

These Bethany constituents shared some of the things they most appreciated about Bethany. They included comments related to the general atmosphere, the educational program, and influences in the area of faith.

Sophia, a sophomore, summed up why she liked Bethany. "For starters," she said, "I like it because it's really small. Instead of having a bunch of popular groups, like geeks and nerds and jocks, it's kind of like one big community and everybody pretty much knows everybody. And even though you might not always be friends with everybody, you at least know what's going on with them. And if someone has something big going on in their life, we're always there to support each other, and it's just like one big community." Marisa (senior student) and Conrad (parent of two boys who were current students and one in a lower grade) also highlighted an awareness of community at BCHS. Conrad added, "There are lots of great people here that we have become friends with – our lives revolve around the school a lot."



Another sophomore, Simon, had a similar comment as his peers about small classes. He especially liked "small" because of the relationships that were possible. He assumed he would know more people elsewhere, but not to the extent of knowing enough about them to care very much. Lindsey, an eleventh grader, also referenced small classes. She said, "There aren't so



many classes for each teacher, so you get a lot more one-on-one time with teachers. They can sit down and talk you through things, and that's very helpful." Jacob, a senior, said that being small is actually what attracted him to BCHS when he was making his decision where to attend high school. He said, "I wanted a smaller community so I could get to know people better. And so far that's been true." Smaller class sizes encourage student-initiated get-togethers. Ian

loved that his junior class had held "a bunch of class parties and everybody goes."

Community and Care. As parents, teachers, and students talked about the general atmosphere at Bethany, they commented that being small enhanced the sense of community. Kaylah, a senior, said, “It feels like everyone is family.” Spanish teacher Craig said it’s not hard for a teacher to know all the student’s names, especially if you have them as freshman and sophomores. In addition, he maintains relationships with students during their last two years, sometimes by just seeing and talking with them in his hallway.

Lindsey further described the atmosphere at Bethany by saying, “It’s very relaxed here. We don’t call teachers *Mr.* or *Mrs.* and you feel more like you’re on the same level with teachers instead of a teacher-versus-student relationship.” However, she said there is still a great deal of respect for each other, both students and teachers.

Students spoke about the feeling of acceptance in the student body. Senior student Vashti said it was a good place to be who you really are. “People aren’t judging you; they are very accepting.” Kaylah perceived that different social groups and family income were not a problem at Bethany. “At this school nobody is less or more cool than someone else. My family is not that rich, and it is okay. It’s not a big deal that I don’t have as much money as [the next person].” Jordan, a senior, credited the teachers and administration with the culture of acceptance. She said they “push to make sure students accept everyone.”

Because it was indicative of her whole experience at Bethany, Vashti shared about the first time she visited Bethany: “They assigned [another student] to greet me at the door. We didn’t know each other at all, but she had sent me this voicemail the night before, telling me she would wait by the door. I was really nervous and worried about how I was going to dress, but on Visitor’s Day those feelings disappeared really quickly. By the end of the day, I felt like I was already going to Bethany. I felt accepted and comfortable with all the people, and I wasn’t even going here. It seemed like everyone that introduced themselves really wanted to get to know me and cared about me already. They weren’t just saying it to be polite.”



Jim, guidance counselor and interim Head of School, believed the result of being small and having community at BCHS was that “things don’t go unnoticed very much.” Craig called it a “sense of accountability from the teachers to the students, and also from the students to the teachers.” He attributed this to the fact that students and teachers had a close enough relationship that they could be honest with each other. He thought this alone built community and “maintained peace in the hallways” because no one could really be anonymous, which then leads back to accountability again. Craig cited an example from when he was a student at a sister Mennonite school. As a freshman, he and a friend were “messing around” when a senior student pulled them aside and said, “Hey, we don’t do that here.” Craig said he saw that same level of accountability at Bethany.

Regarding grades, Jacob perceived Bethany’s students to be more collegial than competitive. He said, “I feel more motivated here. A lot of my peers and friends are more interested in academic achievement, so that motivates me to achieve at a higher level as well. I don’t feel like people are trying to get higher grades, but I feel like everyone is trying to get good grades. It’s not a competition.” Senior student Marisa echoed the idea that getting good grades did not feel

competitive. Instead, she said, “We want each other to get better. We push each other to get a higher grade. Like if Jacob got an *A* on a test and I got a *B*, I would say something like, ‘Jacob, what did you do to get this *A*, because I want the *A* next time.’ So I feel like we push each other for the better, but not in a negative way.”

To facilitate community, junior and senior classes each have a lounge area in hallway spaces. According to students, during lunch and non-class times, they are always in use with some students even sitting on the floor. Students said there were couches in some classrooms as well, all promoting community.



When members of a community know each other, relationships develop. Those relationships build more community, and community leads to caring. Just as credit was given to faculty for instilling in students an acceptance of others, Sophia praised faculty for their encouragement and modeling of how to show care for others. She said, “They teach us that you should care for others, and then they also give us space where we can practice our faith and do things for each other.” Jordan had a different perspective; rather than it being deliberate, she thought showing genuine care for others was “kind of an unspoken thing where we just help each other out with things. Like family, everyone takes care of each other.”

Several people shared an experience from their own life of how the Bethany community had cared for them. For example, when senior student Ryan broke his arm and had to have surgery, some classmates he didn’t know very well visited him at home. Since then, he said it has been interesting to see how his relationships have grown. “People really do care about you.”

Sophia said, “If someone has something big going on in their life, we’re always there to support each other.” She credited the caring community at Bethany for extending care to a staff member and a teacher when they were experiencing illness and cancer. Sophia said they organized fundraisers to provide support in a variety of ways. She commented that sometimes a small group of close friends take a fellow student out to show their care, but at other times when the need is greater, the entire school gets involved.

Renae was in her 19th year of teaching mathematics at Bethany and was one of the recipients of the care described above. She had not grown up in Indiana, so when she moved to Goshen it was because of her job at Bethany. While she developed a good church family, Bethany became her closest family in terms of support. She attributed the interactions current faculty have as important times to connect with each other. They eat lunch together, have weekly faculty meetings, meet in grade level groups, and have conversations in the hall.



When she was sick, Renae experienced “huge support from my co-workers here at Bethany, whether they were bringing me meals, sending me cards or little gifts, cleaning my house, or coming to visit me in the hospital.” Early in her cancer diagnosis and along with a lot of students, her colleagues organized a *Cancer Walk and Run* in Middlebury for her. About 60 people from the Bethany community, including teachers, students, and parents walked with her.

One student shared her experience of the divorce of her parents' right after she started attending Bethany. She said, "I was kind of messed up for a while, but all the support people gave me was amazing. The girls I had just met took care of me. Honestly, I don't know what I would have done if they hadn't been there for me during that time. And I was even the new kid!" This student said those kinds of experiences still happen and make them closer. "We get everything done together. We work together because we like each other."

From a parent's perspective, Conrad said, "I just feel like there's another caring adult watching out for [my boys]. It's almost like an extension of us as parents when I know there's another teacher that cares like I do. When we see teachers at parent-teacher conferences, ballgames, or from interactions in the hallway, it's clear they care about our kids. They remember them and they know who they are. They're watching out so if there is a concern or need, I am sure they would contact us. That feels really good." Even though Conrad was thankful his family had not experienced an urgent need from which to share an example, he was confident that if his family had a loss or crisis in the future, the Bethany community would do whatever was necessary to support them. "Because we're like an extended church, we know we could go to people here and ask for advice or help. We know these people care about us and they're helping to watch out for the boys, whether it's a teacher or parent."

Faculty collegiality. Teachers at Bethany expressed a camaraderie with other faculty members. Nathan said, "As a music teacher, I've really appreciated the teamwork atmosphere and the way in which faculty and staff are able to support each other and use each other as close resources. For instance, there's a lot of support to try new things and make schedule modifications as we get closer to concerts. There's a lot of flexibility to accommodate extra rehearsals I might need for choir groups. It seems to me that we look out for each other and will step in and help each other out where needed."

For social studies teacher Brent, collegiality "is the idea that we're all in this together. We work with fantastic people who are not just good to work with but to worship with and be friends with. We also have good working relationships with each other. So it's a good environment and just a good community." Craig added that it has to do with similar values: "We're all centered around Christ, so we have that shared value."

Opportunities for sports and extra-curricular activities. Students verbalized their appreciation for extra-curricular activities at Bethany. Sophia said, "I like all the opportunities you get here. Here we can play multiple sports and also be in drama, musicals, speech, or debate. You can do a little bit of everything instead of just one thing." When asked how so many schedules could be accommodated, she said Bethany needs students to do multiple things because of the small size. Many students go from one to another activity in an afternoon or evening. Sometimes there are even lunch-time practices or rehearsals. She added, "Since we don't put labels on anyone here, like 'jock' or 'nerd,' students are free to participate in any activity for which they have a passion."

Ryan commented that Bethany was a good place to play a variety of sports throughout four years of high school. He said, “Winning doesn't really matter. It's more about learning so you can



play at your best skill level.” He said it all starts with the coaches because “they help you. If you're not the best player on the team, they push you to make sure you play your best, while at the same time, they push the better players to play their best.” Ian believed the sports aspect of Bethany was one of the reasons he made the right decision to attend. He said Bethany students can make the team as a freshman because of the smaller numbers of students. At least in some sports, he thought most everyone was successful in being on a team.

Simon said there were also opportunities for students to participate in extra-curricular activities they might not have had elsewhere. Sophia enjoyed stage managing for the musicals and plays. She was also on speech and debate teams, and looking forward to joining the Witmarsum staff. In addition, Sophia was planning to work at the upcoming Phone-a-thon. The previous year Ryan enjoyed getting to know eighth graders through peer tutoring.

Conrad believed the sports programs and extra-curricular activities were strengths of Bethany and said it contributed to a sense of community. He said his boys had always played sports and he enjoyed going to the games, “hanging out with other parents,” and being with the rest of the community. Conrad summarized his satisfaction with sports and activities when he said, “Whether they're a good athlete or a good musician or not, students still have the opportunity to be stretched and learn leadership skills.”



Holistic Mentoring

Numerous comments by students, teachers, administrators, and parents confirmed the commitment to prepare students for all of life. The vehicle for this preparation seemed to center around one of Bethany's strengths, that of *mentoring*.

“One of the good things about Bethany is that as teachers we think about developing the student holistically, and not just about preparing them for college.” This comment about Bethany's strengths was made by Nathan, who was in his fifth year of teaching vocal music. He added, “How do we prepare them to be people? How do we encourage them to think more deeply and process and develop their faith as part of their education?” Ryan commented how teachers care about more than just how a student does academically. He said, “Teachers want to know how you're doing in your life, not just teach.” It was one of the reasons he liked Bethany.

Nathan said Bethany students receive a lot of support beyond the classroom. He put it this way: “We act as mentors to students in a variety of ways -- official mentoring sessions here at school, attending church with them, interacting with parents, attending sporting events or concerts, and more. When we see them in the community we feel connected to them in some way. So we wear some different hats, not just that of *teacher*. We look out for them and make sure they're not involved with things they shouldn't be. When they're sick, we get concerned. When they have makeup work, we become flexible. We want students to succeed.” Cheryl, alumna and

parent of two graduates, commented that in addition to the respect students have for their teachers, they also respect them as mentors and friends. As she searched for the right word, she said, “I guess mentoring is a good word for it. It feels more like a mentoring situation because they connect and they talk with the kids about all kinds of things.”

Mentoring was accomplished in a variety of ways: by teachers demonstrating care for students, through coursework and academic preparation for college, and by preparing students for life and next steps – college, career, or citizen.

Mentoring by caring: Teachers demonstrate care for students. “I think it’s clear that when teachers are truly invested and passionate about their material, the kids are more engaged and they can’t help but catch a bit of it.” This is the way Jim described one of the strengths of Bethany Christian High School. Both Nathan’s and Renae’s observations were that teachers at BCHS were of “top quality and experts in their content areas.” Renae said, “I think we have quality teachers who are really passionate about what they teach and work very hard to engage the students in the material.”



Students spoke about how critical teachers were to their success, which was partially a result of their availability and willingness to help when needed. Jordan said teachers were accessible. Junior student Joel stated, “Because of the whole g-mail thing and because we all have computers, it’s easy to communicate with your teachers. It makes it easy to send a quick e-mail to a teacher and ask a clarifying question about an assignment.” Vashti said, “One of the biggest things for me is that teachers are all approachable. They don’t

make you feel stupid if you don’t understand or if you ask a question. Teachers are so willing to help.” Ian credited small classes to part of the reason teachers were willing to help them. He said, “It helps that we’re a lot closer to the teachers and since we have smaller classes, we can get more individual help. Usually teachers are free for lunch and you can go talk with them if you have a question about a certain subject.”

Other students also liked small classes and believed they contributed to greater understanding of the material. In fact for Ryan, it was the best thing about Bethany. “The teachers can focus on you as an individual. If you need help, they’ll take time out of their schedule and come and help you.” Lindsey stated, “Class sizes are a big help. You can ask a teacher questions. Also, you all know each other, so you don’t feel intimidated or dumb if you ask a question in class.”

Teachers and guidance counselors work hard to make sure students do not fall through the cracks. Jim shared a recent example of going the extra mile to make sure a student succeeded. The student had not been doing well in two of his core classes; both teachers were concerned and called home twice with no response. Jim followed through by giving the student his contact information and with urgency, told the student his mother must call him yet that week and set up an appointment to meet with him and the teachers. Jim believed the school needed to take the initiative and be deliberate about follow-up. He said, “So a student can fail, and sometimes they do, but teachers really care and will do everything they can to support success.”

Nathan shared that sometimes in order for a student to succeed, teachers go beyond policy and extend grace. He shared an example from a previous term of a student who had many absences due to illness and was in jeopardy of passing her courses. Together, administration and teachers decided that part of the process of helping this student would be to stay in constant communication, indicating current work in class, how to make up missed work, and new due dates. According to Nathan, part of the reason this works at Bethany is because “there’s been a lot of collaboration since I started teaching here. There are a lot of e-mails thrown back and forth throughout the day talking about specific students and how to meet their needs. And I think that’s one strong suit we have.”



Simon’s comments affirmed Jim’s and Nathan’s words: “Teachers have high expectations. You’re pretty much expected to do your work. You can’t fall under the radar and stop doing stuff. The teachers know you personally so there’s a close relationship between the teacher and the student. In fact, I think students try harder than they might otherwise, just because the teacher wants them to.”

According to Lindsey, teacher follow-up and communication made a difference for her. She said, “I didn’t really care about my grades until I came here. I was getting really bad grades because [I didn’t think anybody] cared. But now that I am here, people (students, teachers, and friends) say to me, ‘Lindsey, I know you can do better than this.’ So we help each other. Then I get it done and I do better.” Lindsey was aware that concerned teachers talked between themselves about students in order to help if they could. She said one time she was struggling in a particular class when a teacher who had taught the course before but was not teaching it at the time offered to help Lindsey. She found this kind of assistance valuable more than once.



Cheryl shared an example of an informal conversation between a teacher and a student that illustrates care and exemplifies a mentoring relationship. Her daughter was taking an elective class with a teacher who “pulled her out in the hall to talk for a bit.” The teacher asked Cheryl’s daughter if she was happy and said “I feel like I’m losing you and it doesn’t seem like you’re really enjoying this.” They had a good talk about the class and if it was the right fit for her. Cheryl was thrilled that a teacher was so in tune with what was going on in her daughter’s life that she would find the time to initiate the conversation.

Mentoring through coursework and academic preparation for college. “Even though it may also be true for other schools, I believe that academics is one of our strengths,” said Renae. She indicated Bethany had increased the number of dual-credit and AP classes offered in order to better prepare students for college. Ian perceived Bethany to apply rigor in his high school’s academic programs. He said, “Here we are held to a higher standard.”

Parents and teachers believed Bethany students were effectively prepared to attend college. AP and dual-credit options were available for those students who talked about going into pre-med, the sciences, or other areas requiring college-readiness. Joel was one of those, taking two dual-credit classes and one AP class. “For the most part,” he said, “AP is a little harder than either of my dual-credit classes.” Ian, also in both dual-credit and AP classes, said the teachers go over a

lot of material and grade rather hard. Jordan said her school work was not easy, but she appreciated the rigor. “Academics challenge me because my courses are a lot of work. But it’s good because I know I will benefit in the long run and I learn a lot too.” Ryan commented that sometimes right now the work feels like too much, but “later in life, you’ll realize, ‘Wow, this really, really helped me.’”

Craig knew Bethany couldn’t compete with the number of course offerings another school might have, but he said, “What we offer here is accountability and a very high bar for excellence. When you set your expectations high, students will meet those expectations. If you have low expectations, people do just enough to meet those low expectations. So I think beyond anything we offer or beyond anything we teach in our classrooms, it’s our expectation of excellence and hard work that really preps kids for college.”

The sense of rigor at Bethany contributed to each stakeholder group’s confidence in college preparation. Joel attributed his confidence in college preparation by saying, “The way [teachers] expect you to turn in homework on time with proper formatting is a good way for us to prepare for college.” Students at Bethany are taught to think critically about the material [they read and study], which is also a strength for college preparation. Brent said it was particularly true for writing papers. Some students and parents have heard college professors say they know Bethany students by the quality of their writing. Others were proud to repeat what they had heard from or about alumni who had gone on to college. Alumni have said they wrote more pages in high school than they do in college. Ian said one of his teachers frequently receives e-mails from former students saying college is easy compared to their high school English class.

While he did not want to slight other areas, Jim affirmed others’ perceptions that writing development is strong at Bethany. He said it was a common belief that the two English teachers were experienced in leading students through the research and writing process. Together they created a writing manual that is used by other disciplines as well. If a student works on a paper in US History, they know what’s expected of them, based on the English curriculum. Jim said, “I would say you cannot go through Bethany without learning how to write. When kids run off to college and they see requirements for a four or five page paper, they just lick their chops and go right through it. I’d clearly highlight the writing process as one of our strengths.”

As a parent, Cheryl heard her son in his first semester in college say, “Mom, I think I’m the only person here who knows how to give a speech. I was kind of embarrassed for some of the other kids when they had to talk. So I guess I did learn some stuff.” Jim expressed his view: “I would say preparation for college is what we do well. Our parents and students have a lot of interest in learning and achieving. We’ve got a very good track record of putting kids in schools and seeing them succeed.”

Other content areas were identified for their rigor as well. In fact, Cheryl said all the content areas were “pretty strong.” Her son was majoring in computer science in college, and credited his math classes at Bethany for preparing him well. Her daughter was majoring in elementary education so had lots of writing to do; she also felt prepared to meet the challenges of college.

Jim talked about another initiative in English classes—infusing technology into the curriculum. Teachers were making short mini-lessons or podcasts on video and putting them on the cloud for students or parents to review.

Beside English classes, several others were specifically suggested by students as being favorites; a description follows of some that were representative. Several people highlighted science classes at Bethany as having good courses or programs. Science classes are known to be hands-on, experiential, and collaborative. Much time is spent in lab work, so “you learn by doing it,” said Jim. Renae credited her colleague in environmental science for being a wonderful example of passion: “She has ... enthusiasm in caring for the earth and for being good stewards of the resources we have. She's able to convey that passion to her students. It's not just her talking, but she's also got the students outside exploring.” The previous environmental science teacher was also an outstanding advocate for the environment; she was awarded a national honor for the secondary environmental science curriculum she wrote with another colleague.

The ninth grade environmental science class uses a broad consortium of resources instead of a textbook. It used to be a one-semester class, but has been developed into a full year course. Bethany students take the class as freshmen, but Renae said around the state it is considered to be an upper-level elective class. For Conrad, the environmental science class was of special interest. He said, “I think they work hard to make it real. For instance, they've created this little wetlands area out here rather than just a typical drainage which they could have gotten away with. And then they take kids out there to learn from it.” Jim shared an example of how students learn at the wetlands: “They may count the number of tadpoles. But it's not just a math exercise; it's a chance to really think about effects on the environment, the amount of oxygen available to us, or what happens when we recycle and try to save and protect our earth. So we have a lot of emphasis on creation care and making good, healthy decisions about body, lifestyle, and the environment.”



BCHS science students participate in other outdoor educational experiences, such as birding, visiting the Elkhart River to understand water quality issues, and trips to [the Goshen College] Mary Lea Environmental Learning Center. In addition, students learn about their own family patterns of energy consumption, recycling, creation care, and other practical ways to apply conservation and sustainability.

As guidance counselor, Jim said he sometimes guides transfer students in tenth or eleventh grade to take the environmental science class. “I can usually talk them in to taking environmental science even with some reluctance, but two weeks in you couldn't pull them out. They don't care if they're the only junior in a class with mostly ninth graders.” Students say their teacher has very high expectations and it is not easy to get a *B*. Jim added, “Yet the kids come away with a sense of satisfaction and pride about what they've been able to accomplish.”

According to Jim, calculus is a “badge of honor” at the high school level. “Last year 14 of our 15 kids scored a 4 or 5 on the national AP test. Students are almost scared of signing up to take this course, and yet our rate of success is just enormous.” But while Jim acknowledged the good

work of teachers, he also credited the students for taking their education seriously. He said, “We’re fortunate to have bright kids who come and want to work hard, so it’s a good match.”

The state of Indiana does not require a foreign language in high school. Yet, Bethany has four levels of Spanish. As a result, Craig sees essentially every freshman and sophomore. He said, “The third year is only for kids who want an Honors diploma, and the fourth year is completely interest-based, although I had 16 at that level last year.” Craig added that Bethany may not have the breadth of Spanish classes offered elsewhere, but what they have in this area is depth. Transfer students sometimes have to “go backwards” to find the level of Spanish for which they are prepared.



Jordan was pleased that she knew Spanish as well as she did and was able to authentically apply it for several weeks. She said, “Right now there is a group of Paraguayans here and I am hosting one and I am completely able to talk to them and feel comfortable doing it. It’s awesome that Bethany has afforded me this opportunity and that I can communicate with [our guest]. I discovered I can translate for my family. It makes me feel awesome that I know this language. I practice it at church too when I work with Spanish speakers. I can read Scripture in Spanish.”

Teachers feel encouraged by the administration to try new teaching methods. Brent attributed his motivation to try new things in class to the support he experienced. “I think it’s a result of the relationships among teachers, and definitely the support of the administration for trying different things.” He continued, “I’ve been trying new things because when I grew up, history classes were always lecture-based and for me that was fine. I enjoyed history, but I know a lot of kids don’t, so since I started teaching I’ve tried lots of things. I learned to teach one way, but I teach a different way.”

Ryan appreciated a particular strategy used in some of his classes to support those who take longer to understand the material. He said, “One thing that is strong in my classes is that there are some people who are more skilled than others, and others who are less skilled than others. My teacher does something that helps both levels. The more talented students help those who are less skilled. So the teachers are big on pushing all students to do their best.” Ryan specifically talked about English class where students write essays about books they read. Students then switch essays and give their peers feedback to improve their classmates’ writing. Ryan said, “We change their essays to make them better. But it also helps me think in a different way so I learn ways to make my own essay better too.”

Perhaps some of what Bethany had to offer in the area of rigor contributed to one student’s recognition as a National Merit Commended Student in the 2015 National Merit Scholarship Program. According to Jim, she was looking at some very prestigious schools and was most likely to have several from which to choose. He said, “These are the kind of students that push us forward, but our outstanding teachers are right at the heart of our core curriculum.”

Several students talked about the application of their classes to life outside of school. Ryan’s favorite classes were economics and nutrition. He especially thought the nutrition class would help him “when I grow up and go to college and live life on my own.” Simon especially liked Spanish class “because you can take what you learn and use it right away. If you hear people

speaking in Spanish, you can start talking and learn more.” He said whenever he wanted to converse in this way, it was not hard to find Spanish-speakers.

After-School Study Table. One way Bethany supports student’s academic work is with a teacher-staffed help session after school. Students are specifically given assistance in math or science. Because students go on a voluntary basis, the number of students varies each day from 5 to 10. Marisa said “The study table really helped me in chemistry because I probably would have gone home and been confused and done it wrong or left some answers blank because I didn’t know how to do the work. Not only did it help me understand what I needed to do to get it done, but then I also got it done.”



Digital Literacy Program. Bethany was in its second year of a program that placed computers in the hands of each student. Ian believed it was a big part of getting assignments done. “Teachers know that everybody has access to the computer to do assignments. Much of our work is focused on the internet and computers now, so having students know how to use different computer programs is important.” Joel added that each class has a Haiku website which provides resources, information, directions for assignments, and a place to upload assignments.

Mentoring for LIFE after high school—college, career, and citizen. Nathan said faculty are committed to “making sure our students are well-equipped for when they leave here.” While students focus on their academic studies, Jim commented, “I think if you ask our seniors whether schools should prepare them for college/career or life in general, they would say, ‘I want to know what I’m doing next year. It’s harder for me to think about 10 years from now, but right now I’m pretty focused on what I want to do and how I’m going to get there’”

Bethany has a mentoring system that accomplishes multiple objectives. CAM stands for “Chapel, Activities, and Mentoring,” which is a specific period in the daily schedule. Chapel is held two days a week and unless there is a general assembly one week, the other three are set aside for the mentoring component of CAM. During this time freshmen students meet in groups with individual faculty members. For grades 10-12, all students rotate weekly between study hall and individual 10-15 minute sessions with their mentor teacher or administrator, usually of the same gender. Teachers and students talk about grades, personal goals, and topics the student initiates. Jim sends out guiding questions and suggestions, particularly for faculty working with juniors and seniors. The advising sessions are designed to guide students and help them stay on track with college and career-related assessments and choices. In addition, social, emotional, and spiritual needs are addressed.

Renaë further described what happens when she mentors her 12 mixed-grade level young women: “In those conversations we can talk about anything from how their day is going to a situation that they're having with friends to how they're doing academically. I can follow their grades online, so I check ahead of time. We talk about classes, where they're having difficulty, and what they might do to strengthen those challenges. One of our goals is that all students understand they have at least one teacher with whom they can connect or that is there for them, and CAM is a time to meet that goal. I think the relationships that develop between teachers and

students in the classroom and then continue to build outside the classroom are one of the best things about Bethany. We can teach them and encourage them academically, but we can also interact with them in so many other ways outside of the classroom.”

Parents appreciated the mentoring time for their children. Conrad described it as a chance to briefly break out of the typical teacher/student role. Instead, the faculty member was there “more as a friend giving advice, being a sounding board, challenging them, or checking in on them in a different way than a teacher normally would.” Conrad said his oldest son had great respect for “the teacher that was his mentor for a number of years. It was a positive thing.”

Jim expressed that the CAM mentoring time was a huge time commitment, but each year they re-evaluate it and as a community, believe the opportunity for academic oversight and spiritual reflection is too highly valued to eliminate it.

There are other strategies to help students prepare for next steps. Bethany has incorporated the Indiana model for laying out a four-year career plan, which begins at the eighth-grade level with a career inventory. The results of that inventory and conversations with students and sometimes parents help guide subsequent course choices.

As guidance counselor, Jim has individual conversations with each senior, usually twice during the fall semester. “Some of them are good to go – they have six college applications in, first and second choices clearly spelled out, deposit turned in, and have early action pending. They’re on top of it.” But others have no idea what they want to do or how to decide. So Jim begins by asking them what they want to be doing 10 years from now and how they plan to get there. He also helps them think about what job shadows they want to experience for two days in January. He said, “We require kids to choose two different careers to shadow and then they write a report on that. Then I go with them on their senior trip and while we’re traveling we talk about those experiences. So we have some things built in very specifically for thinking about college and career, including the intentional one-on-one guidance.”



J-Term. A structure that enhances students’ holistic experiences and relates to life is “J-Term.” Every January students’ freshmen through juniors choose from a variety of alternative experiences. They receive one credit for these every-day-all-day sessions that last two weeks. (Depending on the nature of the activity, summer weeks are sometimes exchanged for January weeks.) Teachers said the purpose of J-Term is to participate in new experiences, travel, interact with those who may have different experiences from your own, and extend the curriculum to outside of Goshen.

Each year the options for J-Term may change, and students must participate in a different experience than in previous years. Examples include a focus on forensic science, biking, winter sports, musical instruments, or baseball. In addition, there have been service trips to Chicago or visitation trips to the New York Hall of Fame, the Appalachian mountains, or Paraguay. Nathan teaches a choir class called “Glee” for students who desire the experience of performing, but do not always have time to work it into their regular schedule. Sophia said she stayed on campus to

study and build a ukulele. In previous years she focused on fitness, basket/jewelry making, and game boards. Conrad said academics were incorporated into his boys' J-Term sessions on sports journalism. He also had a son who went on a week-long camping/biking trip through state parks. "It stretched them," he said.

During the same two weeks, seniors participate in a variety of "next step" activities – job shadow, college applications, and a senior trip (discussed previously). Conrad called J-Term "applied academics in the real world." He added, "I see the value of this experience versus sitting in a classroom. In our society, I think we generally do too much of that in school. So any extra activity like this which Bethany can offer is definitely a strength of Bethany."

Faculty mentoring faculty: E-Teams. While professional development for teachers is not directly related to students, it can have a significant impact on their learning. Renae referred to the current structure for teacher professional development which started two years ago. Instead of the traditional method of evaluating teachers, there is now an "E-team" or "Excellence Team" made up of four faculty and Allan and Hank, the two administrators. Each of the four teachers are assigned to one-fourth of the faculty, their "E-team partners," to observe the teaching of their colleague on a regular basis. Visits are shorter and more frequent; at least one goal is addressed each time. The E-team partners have several conversations about teaching and learning in the teacher's classroom, discuss goal achievement, and act as a resource to each other. At the end of the year, each teacher writes a short reflection of the experience, summarizes progress toward the goal, and indicates how it impacted teaching in their classroom. This is shared with both the E-team partner and administrative supervisor. Renae said of her experience, "I think it has been good in terms of really getting us to think about an aspect of our teaching that could be strengthened. It's also been a non-threatening way to improve our teaching. The regular conversations with our teaching partners motivate us to think about our goal frequently rather than forget about it until the end of the year."

Faith development

How are students at Bethany nurtured in their faith? For Conrad, it boils down to two things. The obvious one is in the formal structures of chapel, Bible classes, and service days. The second and more important are the informal ones -- where faith is specifically discussed, modeled, and integrated. He felt both of these together were critically important.

Formal structures for faith development. As stated earlier, one structure designed for a variety of purposes is the CAM period (Chapel, Activities, and Mentoring). Ian and Joel said Mondays and Wednesdays were faith-based chapels with Friday being more like an assembly time. Sophia said, "I think chapels help a lot with faith development because you hear different stories from the people who come in—pastors, faculty, and other speakers. Sometimes you get a new perspective and you think, 'Oh, I



didn't really think about it like that before,' and so it helps you round out your faith and get a bigger picture of it." In addition, CAM mentoring periods incorporate faith alongside academic and career counseling.

A variety of Bible classes were noted by students in particular. The Old and New Testament courses are taken as underclassmen and explore the whole story/big picture of the Bible. Ryan said, "If you haven't read the Bible very well before, it really helps you learn. We also incorporate memory verses into class, and those stick with you." Brent observed, "Kids at my church who go to Bethany know the Bible well."

Lindsey shared her perception of how Bible classes had influenced her: "Bible class really helps me. I would not have taken it if it was not mandatory. I've learned a lot about what it means to be a Christian and what Jesus was like. I've read a lot more in the Bible since I came here than I would have outside of school."

As juniors, students take Church History. They explore the history of the church as it relates to the Crusades, Anabaptist movement, a Just War, Pacifism, etc. Students also ponder larger issues such as the similarities between Jesus' teachings and that of Mohamad and Gandhi, and what it means to believe in peace.

Jordan, Vashti, and Kaylah highlighted the "Ideal Church Project" they had been required to complete the previous year as juniors. For the project, students design their ideal church, physically build it, and then defend their choices in a written paper. Jordan said, "It really makes you decide what matters to you in a church. For example, I like community and accepting people, so my church is bilingual. I incorporated service into my church because I love to do service. The project really made me think." Vashti added they had to justify everything they put in their church -- windows and doors and where they were placed, kitchen, traditional sanctuary, etc. She had chosen to use chairs and beanbags in her church. Kaylah said her church didn't have any walls and was located in the middle of a park. She said, "People matter to me, so I wanted it to be about the people."

Simon mentioned as you progress in high school, Bible classes move from knowledge to application. Jordan referenced her current senior class, Christian Faith Journey, and said students explore a personal faith rather than someone else's faith. Several references were made to the senior Bible class as the one most likely to influence faith development. At the end of the year, they write their faith story and present it to an audience of family and friends.

Sophia said of the senior faith presentations: "I think that experience really helps people decide about their faith and develop it because it helps you realize where you are with it." Nathan said it also helps students ask themselves some hard questions related to their own faith. From a parent's perspective Cheryl valued the faith journey assignment when she said, "The senior statements they make are amazing. I would have never been able to articulate [my faith] the way I've heard kids articulate what they believe."

Bible curricula encourage students to develop their own faith identity and ask tough questions of themselves rather than strictly give information or determine what is right and/or wrong. Students are encouraged to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions. Nathan

attributed this philosophy to the intent of preparing students to “operate in this world and think as humans.”

Especially in the upper-level Bible courses, students may find themselves questioning their faith. Jordan said Bible classes “help me grow in faith, but also make me question different things that I believe in.” Jim believed this was an important step in the process. He said, “Often students enter college or the next stage of their life and they have to process what their beliefs are versus what their parents’ beliefs are. They’ve grown up in church but they may not like church or feel it is life-giving.” Jim believed that view was respected by Bethany teachers.

Doubt related to faith may even be a part of a student’s faith presentation. Ian said the speech is about what you believe and what you don’t believe and why. Jim articulated the same thing when he said, “[Students] talk about how they believe in God or they don’t believe in God. And then they share what they see as their religious habits for the next four years. Some make you beam when they say, ‘I love Jesus—I was baptized at 14 and I’ve never stopped doubting.’ And others say, ‘What are you talking about? There are so many possible paths to truth and I don’t buy all this Mennonite or Jesus stuff—I think there’s a bigger world out there and you guys are naïve.’ So we have a very broad spectrum of beliefs, but I think it’s largely because we have these open conversations.” Jim concluded by saying he is pleased “with our Bible teachers and how the Bible curriculum works for kids.”

Students sensed a non-judgmental attitude among teachers. Ryan said teachers at Bethany allow different perspectives. He said, “They don’t judge. They just want to help you be the person who you really are. They want you to realize who you are and what you believe.” Vashti remembered when a Korean student with another religion shared her beliefs. She said it was okay – people didn’t try to change her and still accepted her.

Craig further articulated his perspectives in the areas of student’s faith and/or doubt. He believed the danger in allowing students to have questions and explore a variety of viewpoints is that “the student may believe teachers are advocating that everything is acceptable and wherever you come out on the issue is fine – a generic theism. So that’s the danger, but the strength that I’m getting at is that at this school we can be very honest as teachers. When we have questions or doubts, we can be honest with them. And then we also allow students to confront those same faith issues in an honest way so they end up with their own faith instead of their parents’ faith. So yes, the senior faith statements feel a little dangerous sometimes, but at the same point there are spaces given here for people to be honest.” Brent identified Bethany’s practice as a tension between indoctrination and encouraging students to come up with their own faith.

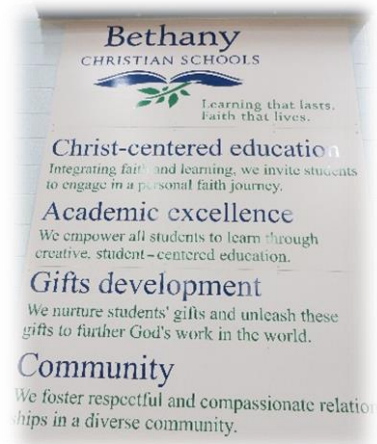


Parents affirmed the best approach was to allow students to make their own choice and own their decision. Conrad said, “In fact, if you force them into a mold, it may just push them away from a real faith in God. I would say it’s more of a nurturing environment here, saying ‘here’s what we believe and here’s why we believe it.’ I guess I feel better about them questioning their faith here with a caring teacher in a small community than not exploring it at all until they get to

college. By then they are much more on their own and there may not be anyone to walk with them. I think Bethany has a pretty down-the-middle approach that has a better chance of nurturing genuine faith in students. Students can make a choice and have some support along the way.”

Cheryl also said allowing students to own their own faith was “a positive thing, even though it is uncomfortable.” She comments to her children and her youth Sunday School class, “I can tell you what I think, but that doesn’t make it yours. You have to make it your own. Just don’t be afraid to ask the questions.”

Informal structures for faith development. Faith is demonstrated by many people in the community and students observe teachers living it out every day in a variety of ways. For Kaylah, it was the relationships she had in her Bethany community that contributed to her faith development. She said, “People are really close here and that is one of the things that helps me in my faith. At Bethany I don’t have to go elsewhere to find my support or what I need. It’s so peaceful and it calms me. It makes me feel so much better. Throughout high school I’ve had a better relationship with God and with my faith. It’s because of people, because of relationships.”



Cheryl said she values a lot of things about Bethany, but one of the desires she has for her children is that “they have a worldview rather than a just-me view” that gets integrated into their life. “It’s thinking outside yourself, beyond local, and outside the community. Greg and I believe we’re here to serve, and if you can get that idea implanted early on it just becomes a part of who you are.”

Some of Cheryl’s lasting memories about Bethany were the *High Aim* students her family hosted when she was a student in the 70s. Inner city kids lived with local families in order to attend Bethany. Even as adults, her family is still close to some of these former students, getting together at Christmas or other times of the year. Cheryl now realizes her desire for her children to also gain a broad worldview may have come from those early Bethany experiences.

Integration of faith into all aspects of Bethany life was common. Teachers pray in class for a struggling student, initiate conversations with students surrounding faith issues, and incorporate faith into lesson topics. A common example came from Ryan. He said, “Adults here want to help you in life and in your faith. For instance, our tennis coach—about every week he does devotions on how we can look for the good things in life, and then focus on finding the joy in that. I feel like it’s helped me a lot throughout this year.” In government class, Jordan said students wrote a political profile, a paper on where they stand politically and how their faith influences their political views.

Jacob liked it when his teachers asked for prayer requests in class and then had a time of prayer. He said, “It strengthens my faith.” Marisa added, “When they do that, it shows us that teachers care about faith and they want us to express our faith too. I think that the moment of silence helps because you can say a prayer every morning and it really helps you connect with God and think about how life is going. So I really like it because you can talk to God.” Marisa added that

she finds herself praying more at the end of the week “thanking God all the opportunities I had this week.”

As a teacher, Craig valued the freedom to integrate faith into his classes. In his Spanish 3 and 4 classes, discussions sometimes lead into controversial topics. He appreciated that he could be “pretty honest about my biases related to Anabaptist values, and be understood.” During semesters when Renae had a class right after chapel, she often took the opportunity to comment briefly about what she heard in chapel that morning.

Renae’s own experience with cancer two years ago gave her the opportunity to reflect on her own journey with the disease and share in chapel some of what she learned from her illness, as well as some of the challenges she faced. Because she shared how it impacted her faith, there were follow-up conversations with kids, some she said that “were pretty important.”

BCHS students have been impacted enough by faith that they sometimes share with their church congregations about the role Bethany has played in the development of their faith – particularly Bible classes and discussions with teachers and friends about issues of faith.

Even though Bethany is owned by the Mennonite church, individuals sensed a focus on being Christian rather than Mennonite. Both Marisa and Sophia commented that the school doesn’t focus on one religion over another, nor does it discriminate against those who are not Mennonite. Vashti said she was not a Mennonite, but she found the school to be very open to others. However, Mennonite values and tenets were freely shared and influenced the culture of the school in numerous ways. Jordan commented, “There are many different religions here and it is broader than just Mennonite. But things we practice, like Service Day or not singing the National Anthem, are the Mennonite values we learn.”

Craig made a comment to summarize his perspective on Mennonite education at Bethany: “What it boils down to is you are a follower of Jesus. So then your ethics and social actions come from that foundation.” Jim said it another way: “As a faculty, we have different ways of accomplishing it, but I think we would all agree that our primary mission is to serve Jesus Christ.” From the perspectives of the students, teachers, parents, and administrators in this story, Bethany Christian High School is fulfilling that mission.

This report was written by Ginny Birky, PhD, from George Fox University (Newberg, OR) as a sabbatical leave project and in partnership with Mennonite Education Agency/Mennonite Schools Council. Ginny grew up in the Mennonite tradition, graduated from Bethany Christian High School, Hesston College (AA), Goshen College (BS), Ohio State University, (MS), and Oregon State University (PhD). She was on the School Board of Western Mennonite High School for six years and on the Board of Overseers of Hesston College for 12 years. She is a former high school teacher and currently teaches doctoral students in the College of Education at George Fox University. Prior to this project, all of her research had been related to public high schools. The project was supported in part by the George Fox University Grant GFU2014G07.

