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

Ginny Birky

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# *Faith, Learning, and Success: What's Working in Mennonite High Schools?*

*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 early fall of 2014 to determine the strengths and distinctives of the school related to school atmosphere, academics, and faith development. I visited Central Christian High School on September 22, 2014 and interviewed 14 participants: six students, four teachers, three parents, and the superintendent/high school principal. 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 Central 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 Central Christian High School 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 Central Christian 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 Central Christian High School?*

*"To Know Christ and to Make Him Known"*

Central Christian High School (CCHS) was established in 1961. Although this report is limited to grades 9-12, Central Christian School as a school system currently serves students from preschool through grade 12. The 60-acre campus is located on the edge of town in Kidron, Ohio and is owned by the Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA.



**CENTRAL  
CHRISTIAN** SCHOOL



Central Christian High School's 142 students in grades 9-12 are from a variety of backgrounds. Besides those from the local area, there are 23 international students from six countries: China, South

Korea, Colombia, Albania, Bolivia, and Mexico. Students attending Central Christian come from 22 different church denominations.

Students at CCHS are served by state-licensed faculty members, 35% of whom hold masters degrees. 30% of them are alumni of Central. Besides teachers, other certified employees include the principal/superintendent and guidance counselor. In addition, full- and part-time non-certified staff provide support for both students and other employees in the school.

*Mission Statement: Central Christian School is commissioned by the Mennonite Church to partner with Christian families and congregations to educate and nurture the whole person by teaching Biblical values, practicing Christian discipleship and community, promoting academic excellence, and encouraging a faith commitment to Christ and the Church.*



Central Christian High School  
3970 Kidron Rd. PO Box 9  
Kidron, OH 44636  
Superintendent & High School Principal: Gene Miller  
<http://www.ccscomets.org/>

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 Central?*

Participants in this study emphasized the *relational* nature of Central Christian constituents as the greatest strength. In addition, *academic experiences* and the *spiritual influence* on students and other members of the community were strong. This report is organized around the description of these themes.

### *Relational*

“You asked me to identify the strength of the school? We are a relational group,” said Von, a 22-year veteran science teacher at Central Christian. “I think it is a dramatically different approach than many other institutions. We are relational with our students. And I also think we are relational with each other. I think it’s one of our distinctives.”

*Atmosphere/Environment.* When asked what the best thing about Central Christian was, most participants first said it related to the school’s day-to-day atmosphere and environment. Lisa, parent of a senior daughter, did not hesitate when she said, “It’s the loving, nurturing, and positive atmosphere.” Emily, a senior student, had similar words when she said, “The loving and caring atmosphere.” Gracie, a junior, said, “Probably the environment, the atmosphere.” And Elijah, a sophomore, said, “Everybody gives support to people and they care.” These perspectives about Central were echoed repeatedly by high school parents, teachers, and students.

Students at Central feel accepted for who they are. Tammy, parent of two Central graduates and one current senior, said, “Students are welcome to be themselves and no one makes fun of anyone for being different.” There is a sense of valuing each person for all the gifts they bring because everyone’s gifts are different. Senior student Rowan said students can be more free in expressing themselves and their views and opinions and still be accepted by others. Stacey, also a senior, said, “We don’t really have cliques here, or even small friend groups.” Yet, she said she had many close friends. Scott, a junior, described Central as being a supportive environment. He said, “The vast majority of people here are interested in building you up.”

Many people enjoy the “small” school atmosphere. It was the first thing Rowan mentioned: “I like the small student body. Smaller classes enable more personal relationships with people and especially the teachers. I also think you know everyone better – you know their stories.” Elijah appreciated that he knew everyone’s name in the school, and that most of them would know him as well. Students say ‘hi’ to each other in the hallway and give each other high fives. Perhaps more importantly, he said, “Gene stands out in the middle of the lobby and says ‘hi’ to everybody by name as they’re coming in the morning.” Some believed the atmosphere was so welcoming that acceptance just happened naturally.

According to one teacher, Central faculty and staff have been addressed by their first names since 1962. While this practice often seems disrespectful to faculty when a new person arrives, they soon discover that students have a very high respect for their teachers and administrators. This is a



unique characteristic among schools, but may make a subtle contribution to the relational component at Central. Von, a teacher, explained it this way: “It’s that priesthood of all believers that we Mennonites like to do, and yet I am a faculty member and you’re not. But I’m not the fountain of knowledge -- I’m really one of you. It is that weird place, but we’re all learners.” While the informality poses some infrequent challenges, it is part of the culture and “it works,” so there are no plans to make changes to this practice.

Inga, Mom to three current Central students, particularly appreciated the diversity and worldview that international students bring to the school. As a former student 25 years ago, she said some people thought students at Central then were sheltered from the world, but she said her world was broadened as a result of knowing kids from Cleveland and Ethiopia. She believed the same is true for her children now as they interact with students from Mexico, China, Korea, and Honduras. She said, “It’s more of a homogeneous environment in the public school than at Central.”

Former students remember the good years they had at CCHS. Tammy’s two daughters are now in college. She said, “They’ve had chances to be in the world, and now they come back with a huge appreciation for the environment that was here.” Tammy summarized her feelings about the environment when she said, “The days are not just about school. They are about other things as well.”

*Mutual Appreciation.* Speaking to students, teachers, parents, and administrators at Central was like talking to a mutual admiration society! Compliments and appreciation were generously given between all groups of constituents. Gene, Central’s superintendent and high school principal, put it this way: “This is a great community in which to have a school. Not only do we have great parents and great kids, but we also good churches and a good community. When students come here expecting a good community, that helps create a good community. So I’m humbled that I am able to be a part of this organization.”

When choosing a school for her three children, Tammy said it was important to feel good about the rest of the community they were going to be raising their kids with: “It’s just been an absolutely wonderful experience to parent with these teachers and other parents. We’re not all the same, but everybody respects everyone else’s way of doing things. It takes a Village. I can’t say enough about it.”



Parents felt valued by teachers and administration. They experience a sense of cooperation when family events come up. Tammy believed teachers value family as much as they value school, which then results in strong families. In addition, parents feel valued when they walk through the doors at Central. Brenda at the Welcome Center “is incredible,” said one. Another said, “I feel very comfortable and could talk to Gene or any of the teachers about anything.”

Teachers also felt nurtured at Central, not only among their fellow teachers, but administrators as well. Von said, “As faculty members, we carry each other’s burdens. We are in this together. It’s not an ‘us-or-them’ feeling between us, the faculty and them, the administrators. Being at odds with each other does not exist here. Now, that doesn’t mean that we are [always] in complete agreement, but at the end of the day, we are all here trying to do the same thing.”

Gracie said, “I used to go to a public school, and it's a lot different [here]. The teachers there are doing a good job, but you weren't on a personal level with your teacher. It was just kind of like you're another student that she has to teach. But here, it's more like the teachers say, ‘How you doing, Gracie? How's it going?’ or, ‘Do you need help with this subject? Because I can help you.’ I really like the hands-on approach we get here.”

Central provides such a caring community for its members that Von also shared a caution. He had a friend who taught at Central and whose father passed away. Von said, “In the midst of that, we were just community for him, and I remember him saying, ‘There's no line item in my contract that you can put in for the caregiving that happened here.’ And I would echo that. It is real and it is tangible. Perhaps though, one of the dangers is that we have to make sure that this isn't church. There have been moments where I think that that could easily have happened.”

Part of the environment at Central is that students are trusted. Math and physics teacher Dave has been at Central for 39 years. He said, “We have such neat kids. The least of my worries here is discipline. It's non-existent for me as a teacher.” Von confirmed that the “school's default is to trust the kids. Rather than come from a place of setting up all these rules to hem them in, we would rather say, ‘We're going to empower you and trust you to make good choices.’” Von illustrated this trust when he told about a time he took kids to the Florida Keys for a week of study. He told the students, “I'm 48. I'm going to bed at 11 pm. Lights are to be out at midnight, and good night.” He said he went to sleep and trusted the students to do the right thing.

*Cooperation / Give and Take.* Inga said “Central students are very busy. They are involved in a lot of things, and it makes them so well-rounded.” High school students are encouraged to get involved in numerous activities that will enhance their experience and their lives, even if they do not excel in all of them. Von said, “Our music program is clearly very, very good. But we also encourage them to be in athletics. We encourage them to be in drama. We want them to be involved in their local churches. When you start stacking all those things up, you have this very well rounded individual who has more life experience than just course content.”

In addition to music, drama, and sports, Central students have opportunities in a variety of programs that are built into the school calendar. These include Community Service Day, School Day Out, and Senior Service Trip. Other opportunities for students include the Science Olympiad group and STUCO (Student Council).

One option for involvement mentioned frequently was OPCO (Operation Connection), a program that connects older students with younger ones at least once a month.

Gracie, a junior, saw this opportunity to be one in which she could be an example and mentor for younger students. She said, “We hang out with seventh and eighth graders that will soon be in high school. That way they won't feel like they're jumping into this giant sea of people and not know what they're doing. It's also a nice way for juniors and seniors to take up the responsibility of leadership.”

Junior student Scott was thankful for the opportunity to be involved in so many things. “I just can't express enough gratitude to the school for





allowing me to do all these things 'cause as I'm looking toward the future, I know I'm not going to be able to do all this stuff because I will have to narrow my focus. I'm just very glad I got the opportunity to do all this here.”

Tammy also believed that student involvement in activities was an important part of Central, and that both musical abilities and academic gifts were held as high as athletics. When asked to elaborate, she said, “One of the strongest things at the school is that the athlete is also in the choir and in the orchestra and the drama, and each one of those is very important. It's just the coolest thing to go to a soccer game and not be able to schedule one on a certain date because they're all in the choir and have to be at the choir event. So to me, that makes everybody valuable.” Tammy added that students at Central were “super busy,” but somehow for most of them, it was working. She said, “Some can juggle more balls than others, but it's a place where you're able to do that, and try out a lot of things.”

Tammy herself helped coach girls' tennis teams. She said five of her team were also varsity singers, so they come to school early or stay late to practice and play. She commented that both parents and coaches have the attitude of “How can we make this work for you?” Regarding students' involvement in competing activities, Gene commented, “I have often said when you get beat by our soccer team, you are also beat by our choir or orchestra because those same kids are involved in both.”

Because Central puts great value in high student involvement, there are fewer scheduling conflicts and competition between the potential activities. Bible teacher Henry said, “This is a school where music and athletics work side by side. We just work to resolve schedule conflicts and try not to let the student be in the middle. It's a matter of mutual respect and of give and take.” Coach Von spoke a similar sentiment when he said at times it's frustrating, but “at the end of the day, what is best for kids? And we go from there.”



Von shared two examples that demonstrate the kind of cooperation mentioned by these teachers. He said several years ago they had an outstanding baseball team and they ended up playing in the state semi-finals. “Here we are, a little school, and tournament game dates are set and you can't move them. It [also] happened to be the night of our spring concert. Now a spring concert here is a big deal. That's what we do. The community comes. The kids are here. It is a packed house. So these kids had a baseball game and here's this school conflict. So the concert went on. All of a sudden, you see the back of the risers and here are these guys in their baseball uniforms, not in their ties, but in their baseball uniforms because they wanted to be at that concert, too. That is the kind of kid we're producing.”

Another example was when the volleyball team went to the state finals. After the game, they went to a restaurant to eat. The team happened to be extremely gifted singers, so at the meal instead of praying, they sang a blessing. “Somebody in the restaurant asked, ‘Is this an ensemble choir that's competing?’ And the coach said, ‘That's my volleyball team.’”

Gene commented on the value of student involvement in activities beyond the actual skill: “The bottom line is that what you learn doesn't matter that much. It's the character you develop and the

relationships you create that will determine who you become. And who cares whether it looks good on your résumé as long as you have developed as a person? For example, if you've been able to manage all that involvement, if you've been able to develop the ability to play an instrument where you feel comfortable singing in church, and you also have an appreciation for the teamwork and all that happens at games, then we say we've done our job."

*Heart of Central.* Every afternoon for 20 minutes, eight to ten students from the same class meet with a faculty member for a time of connecting with peers and an adult. According to the CCHS website, the purpose of Heart of Central is to "nurture students through intentional relationship to help them discover their identity in Christ and learn to lead themselves, so they can eventually lead others."

Heart of Central is meant to be a safe place for students to be nurtured themselves and also learn how to nurture others. Whereas academic classes primarily emphasize the *head*, this program implies emphasis on the *heart* as well. Von said it is a time to talk about chapel ("What did you hear from the speaker this morning?"), ask questions, and talk about what's happening in our students' lives. "It's a way to get to know the students and care for them." In addition, much of what happens is more student-driven than teacher-driven, and therefore helps develop leadership skills in students.

Heart of Central is meant to be practical, spiritual, and visionary. Faculty who share a class meet together once a week to do more detailed curriculum planning. For each year there is a theme that aligns with current student life experiences and builds on the previous year. Freshmen focus on understanding themselves, personality types, and study styles. Sophomores concentrate on developing life skills. Elijah shared how his sophomore group would soon be getting their driving permits, and had just talked about driving responsibilities and how those responsibilities relate to different freedoms in their lives. He said in class they discussed how the more we show responsibility, the more freedom we get from our parents and other people. The theme for juniors is related to becoming a leader. They study Stephen Covey's seven habits of highly effective people and John Maxwell's 21 principles of leadership. In their senior year, students focus on being called to serve. They plan their senior project as a whole group and take a trip to Pittsburgh to serve inner city folks.



These overarching themes play out in practical ways. Students learn how to change a tire, write a mission statement for their life, memorize scripture, and work on personal career-planning and goal-setting. One skill they learn and practice is that of leading a devotional. World language teacher Allison said she introduced this task by telling students, "I never had to do a devotion in front of a large group of people until I started working here at Central, and I was terrified." Von had a similar thought when he said, "I think back to my own growing up years, and as a 16-year-old, I wonder if I would have been able to lead a devotional for my peers. I would say 'no way.' That was not on my radar as something I would have done. But I think it is one moment in a student's life where they can begin to put together spiritual ideas to be shared publicly, and hopefully, in a very safe environment."



Inga added another perspective to Heart of Central. She had spent many hours transporting kids in her car, often a mix of some from CCHS and some from public schools. Inga noticed how students talked and compared experiences, and her observation was that there is less drama at Central. When she asked Central students why they thought that was the case, they said it's because you sit down with teachers and peers and talk about life and deeper issues. Inga believed it was as if an adult was in the room moderating the conversation, helping relationships be a little smoother, and allowing students to tackle topics that would otherwise be too hard for them to handle with their peers alone. Inga said, "If you can talk about it, it may avoid the drama that would happen if you couldn't talk about it."

Henry's comments seem to sum up what others perceived about Central's nurturing environment. He said, "What's unique or distinctive here is a culture that is really hard to describe. It is a culture that I have seen emerge over the years. I think it's a very safe culture. There's a real sense of community here. I think students and faculty just find this place to be a warm place, a very friendly place, a place where they can be real with each other."

### *Spiritual Influence*

When asked how Central best impacts students in faith development, the responses included chapel, morning devotions, Bible classes, Heart of Central, classroom integration and application, and modeling.

Ask Tammy, a parent, how spiritual formation happens at Central Christian, and she will tell you it happens all day long in numerous ways. Repeatedly she has said to her husband, "I wish we were keeping track of all the times we say to each other, 'Okay, that's why we're paying tuition.'" She made this comment because of the things their children say at home related to faith development. For example, it is not unusual at the dinner table for their children to refer to a chapel speaker and say, "Oh, you should have heard this speaker. You would have really liked them [or you would not have liked them] or the conversation we had in class afterwards." After telling their parents about chapel, the teenagers often want to know what their parents think about the speaker's comments.



These conversations provide great opportunities for parental influence and perspectives. Tammy added, "And sometimes there are some 'I'm not sure I believe in God,' conversations. That is okay because we're having that conversation at home because it started at school."

Henry also commented on the many influences throughout the day on a student's spiritual formation. He said it happens just because students know they're cared for and that faculty pray for them. He didn't think there was usually one defining moment. "It's more about an engaged spirituality on this campus, and that's relational."

*Chapel.* Chapel meets daily for 20 minutes, and according to Henry, "daily chapels significantly influence our school culture." The chapel planner has help from a campus ministries team which consists of a group of students who also gain leadership skills from the experience. Fridays often consist of a student-led worship chapel, usually with a worship band. Students of all grade levels

are invited to lead worship in chapel, sing, or pray. Allison said chapel is one way “to prepare students for leadership in their churches.” She said every time teachers talk about scheduling, they recognize that they could get more into the day if they didn’t have chapel. “We could do [numerous other things] instead. But it’s always unanimous -- don’t get rid of chapel. It’s an important part of the day where we can come together as a group and for community.”

Scott believed that chapel helps build community because it draws everyone together in the same place and for the same experience. Von shared an example when he said, “Today is a very significant day for our community. One of our students is having brain surgery. The community has surrounded this family and this girl in significant ways. In chapel we have the opportunity to gather as a body. There is something about the collective body gathering together that is powerful.”

Teachers and students both found personal value in chapel. Allison added the benefit for her: “The idea that we get to come to chapel and be fed daily, hear pastors, students, alumni, staff, or other faculty speak is a blessing.” Stacey said the speakers “always talk about God and how you can change your life. Also, if you want to talk to them about anything, you can go up to the speaker afterwards. Or teachers are always open for that as well.”

*Morning devotionals.* First period is longer than other classes to allow time for morning devotions. Dave said it is one avenue available for teachers to get to know their students and to care for them because it is a time to pray for those who have concerns, prayer requests, or praises. Elijah said, “Prayer requests help you care about people because you learn what they’re struggling with or what’s going on in their life. It’s sort of nice to start your day like that. And if you start your day that way, you have a better mindset towards the rest of the day.”

Besides the privilege of sharing devotions with her students, Allison also appreciated the weekly devotionals shared by administrators with the staff. She said, “It’s all just a real blessing. To be able to combine your job, your profession, and your faith is just wonderful. Some days I feel like I get more out of the day than my students do!”

*Bible classes.* Two of Elijah’s favorite classes were New Testament and Old Testament. When asked why, he said “Old Testament is sort of like a history class, but it’s a different history than normal. And you learn a lot of new stuff that you didn’t realize about the Bible. It also gives you a different perspective on how you look at your faith.”

Henry, the Bible teacher, has been at Central for 31 years. He has a reputation for teaching academically challenging Bible classes; Henry said he is intentionally academic. “[The students] are the church. I am also intentional about making it connect with everyday life. I want students to have a deeper understanding of the stories and teachings in the Bible. I tell them that their test grade has no reflection on their spirituality, and this is not Sunday School. I am not going to entertain you. But it’s going to be worth your while.” Henry concluded by saying he also loves to have fun with kids.



Tammy stated that anyone who has been through Henry's Old Testament class “can rattle the whole thing off forwards and backwards.” She did not go to a Christian college herself, so had no Bible education in her background. She admitted, “I even get intimidated teaching Sunday school at the high school level because I know the kids that go here know the Bible and background way better than I do.”

Lisa commented on one of the activities Henry does in his Bible classes. He takes them to the backyard of his home where they are invited to sit by themselves and read the Bible. Lisa’s daughter told her mom it was “such a cool experience.” Lisa said, “Where else but Central can you just take your class and go off campus or outside of the school building and be in a different setting for the academics? This was a different way of having the kids just slow down and stop and think. It teaches kids you can go out in nature and read the Bible and have a different experience.”



Stacey and Emily both mentioned one of the things Henry does throughout the year. He takes time out of his day and meets individually with each of his students for 15-20 minutes. Stacey commented, “It’s really neat.” More rigorous than an individual meeting with Henry is an assignment students have at the end of their freshman year. Every student in Henry’s class is required to summarize the whole Old Testament story from memory in a 15-minute speech. It’s a lot of pressure, but everybody does it because it’s a big chunk of the semester grade. Inga said, “It stresses them out incredibly! But it is so

good for them. It’s kind of a rite of passage when it’s all said and done. They get so much more than the facts of the Old Testament. They have to wrestle with it in order to make their presentation.” Henry said students present the speech to eight or ten sophomores who had to do the same thing the previous year. These peers evaluate them along with another faculty person. According to Henry, “The sophomores sort of relearn the story and they’re almost always impressed with how well the presenters do.” Inga expressed her appreciation when she said, “I love that assignment. They don’t. But when it’s over they think they’ve done something amazing, and they have.”

Henry hears appreciation for his courses from former students and also from parents. “I just had a former student tell me the other day at a soccer game, ‘Thank you for teaching me Old Testament because I’ve been able to use it.’”

*Classroom integration and application.* Allison said the best thing about teaching at Central is the ability to express one’s faith. Von stated that in the midst of a lesson he’s teaching, there may be a moment where the lesson stops and they apply some Christian principle to daily life. “I want to say it’s not just in Bible class. Henry is just an extremely gifted instructor who has this blend of being a teacher and a pastor, but it goes beyond Henry. Teachers frequently say to their students, ‘What did you hear?’”

Dave talked about the difficulty of integrating faith into his math and science classes. But he added, “I’m pretty direct in getting my faith out there because there are so many areas that it’s easy to jump in and say, ‘Okay, this has affected me this way.’” Because math is about discovery, he said, “My definition of math is discovering what God is like as we discover the world, so I have it right there on the wall.”

One tool Central teachers use to intentionally integrate faith into their subject areas is to determine how they will incorporate faith into the content standards. Gene said in their curriculum maps for planning purposes, they added a faith column entitled “Spiritual applications.” This helps teachers stay on track with content, but also determine how they will apply spiritual principles.

*Modeling.* Gene believes that faith is primarily caught rather than taught. As a result, faculty and staff modeling is an important component of faith development at Central. Henry said, “I think we model what it means to be faithful. We are not a school that every week has an altar call. We call people to a way of life. We call people to a Christian worldview, and I think we do that in a gentle and inviting sort of way. That’s how faith development happens here because it’s not a culture of fear.”

As a junior, Scott has had opportunities to observe teachers modeling a faithful way of life. He expressed this by saying, “One of the things that I have really appreciated most about this school is that it gives me very good role models as far as what faith is and what faith can be. I think being at school a lot and having all these great examples of Christians that I can look up to and kind of emulate is what’s been formative for me. Here you are in a Christian environment and you learn about the Bible and about Christian practices. And then you say, ‘Okay, so I have all this information. Now what do I do with it?’”

Parents notice when teachers model their faith and it is what convinces them to continue sending their children to Central. Inga shared two examples. In the first one, she said, “I remember the first time I picked my daughter up from cross country practice. I was early and I overheard the coach doing an end-of-practice devotional with them, talking about how he tries to memorize scripture so it continually goes through his head. That was a big influence from [my daughter’s] coach, whom she greatly admired.” The other example was: “When my daughter went on a choir trip with Mr. Shue, whom she also admired, she along with others got to spend quality time with him for one week. She was able to see how he integrates faith into his life more than just in the classroom. To see it 24/7 for a week is awesome.”



Teachers recognized their privilege and responsibility to model Christ-like actions. Von had a sense that at Central he is part of a youth ministry and in many ways, he is looking at the future of the church. As a result, he has the opportunity to help shape the future of the church. Allison revealed, “I’ve stopped and prayed with kids in the bathroom or hallway because they were upset. It’s a neat way to be able to share your faith with them.”

Confidence in Central’s ability to positively influence adolescent students in their faith development was evident from several parents and students. Tammy said, “While I want this to be a Christian place, they’re leaving room



for our kids to doubt and question. I'm okay with this because of the people I know -- I totally trust anyone here." Scott mentioned students' access to teachers for help in spiritual matters. He said, "If you feel something spiritually tugging on you, you can always go talk to a teacher."

*Mennonite connection.* Inga expressed her perspective that one of Central's strengths was the connectedness to the Mennonite church. She specifically cited being able to go to choir festivals, believing that it allows them to interact with the wider church. Many of Central's students do not come from a Mennonite background. Yet, they and their parents have developed a strong appreciation for Mennonite values and influence. Gene referred to two parents from non-Mennonite backgrounds when he said, "They both just have wonderful testimonies of how they hardly knew about this place and they're just all over it now."

Tammy said coming to the Mennonite church from a strong Presbyterian background compelled her to examine everything she believed because it didn't necessarily line up with what Mennonites believed. She said, "Some of the pacifism stuff has created heated topics of conversation at our dinner table. We've had to work through what each of us are hearing and what we think, which is great. There's nothing that makes you own your faith more than having to defend it. So that's been really, really good. My kids are definitely more Mennonite than I am, but that's what they've been raised in."

While Tammy appreciated Central's Mennonite tenets, she also valued the diversity of backgrounds in the student body. She said it has created conversations about beliefs both at home and between students. Tammy stated, "Everybody has learned how to respect each other even though they may think quite differently. It's allowing everybody to work out their own salvation. It's beautiful to see that happening."

One such student is Gracie who comes from a non-denominational background. When asked if she ever felt out of place at Central, she said, "No, not at all. They don't just say, 'Okay, this is a Mennonite-based school, this is how to live the Mennonite way, and this is what you should believe.' Instead they encourage a lot of discussion about things that would challenge us to actually ask ourselves questions like, 'Okay, what do I think about this and what do I believe?'"

Gracie went on to say that a lot of things Central teaches are from a Mennonite perspective. But they also encourage a lot of different kinds of faith. She said, "It's encouraging to come here and know that so many students that come aren't Mennonite, but they can still come and feel welcome. They can still feel encouraged in their own faith based on what Central teaches. That includes some who don't really know what it means to be a Christian. But Central can help teach them that."





Lisa, a parent with no association to Central before her daughter attended, said early on she and her husband knew a little of what it was like to become a part of the Central community, but they did not know the culture or values of Mennonites. So they worked with Bruce to start a mentoring program for new families. Lisa said, “Whenever there is a new family that comes in at the beginning of the year, we match them up with an existing family and welcome them, invite them to school events, and share information parents might want to know about the event. We exchange phone numbers and e-mails, and invite them to contact us for any question they might have.” Lisa recently told Bruce, “You've got to keep this up because it's huge for an outsider who's not in a Mennonite family. As far as Mennonites, there's really not that much difference, but you don't know that until someone helps you figure it out.”

Some teachers and staff members also come from non-Mennonite backgrounds. Allison's husband was a pastor with the United Church of Christ. She said that through her years of teaching and asking a lot of questions about Mennonites and what they believed, “we eventually decided we agreed with these Mennonites, with the Anabaptists, and with the distinctives. My husband is now a pastor of a Mennonite church, and so that's what I think is really unique. I feel like the school has changed our lives; it has ministered to me in many ways.”

### *Academic Experiences*

“While the faith piece is critically important to us [as parents], quality education is also very important, and I think academically, Central is very strong,” said Tammy. Lisa believed her daughter had always been academically challenged to a high standard at Central. Elijah was confident he was getting a good education. He said, “I think they're just as good here as any other.” Rowan added, “We have fairly high standards for as small a school as we are.”



*Teachers.* Teachers are at the heart of academic quality. To the question of what are the strengths at Central Christian, student Rowan answered, “I would say faculty are primary. I assume they are not paid that much, so they're here because they want to be. Some of my teachers should even be teaching at the college level.” Inga also commented that Central teachers “don't get paid a ton, but they are in it for more than just money. They are in it for a purpose. Their care for students goes beyond academics. But that strengthens the grade too.”

Tammy had an explanation for the same idea: “I think what happens here is that the kids build a relationship with teachers in such a way that they don't want to disappoint their teachers, and it makes them perform better. It's like a coach you really like. They know teachers care about them, and they care about teachers. And while you may not really like the subject, you don't want to disappoint the person who's teaching it to you because you don't want them to think it's them.”



One teacher, unaware that he had been mentioned numerous times for being an outstanding teacher, said he was amazed at the quality of teachers at Central. He said some are adjunct professors and others are working on a doctoral degree. Another teacher said of his colleagues, "They are off the charts wonderful." Gene confirmed he had quality teachers at Central. He said many were master teachers, "as good as they come," and teachers who when observed "get me energized."

Teachers are dedicated to their jobs and spend significant time preparing lessons. One teacher who has taught at Central for over 20 years said his colleagues are not just punching a time clock. "If you come here at 8:00 or 9:00 at night, there's going to be somebody here working. If you come here on a Saturday morning, there's going to be somebody here working. Forgive us, but if you come here on a Sunday evening, we're teachers. I'm sorry. We try to keep the Sabbath holy, but there's going to be somebody here. I think that commitment and excellence matters in the classroom."

Even when she isn't very good at math, Stacey said she still enjoyed the class because she liked teachers Dave and Lisa. "They're not condescending. They're kind of on the same level as you, like just a friend helping you out." Lisa confirmed this perspective when she talked about how teachers create an environment where a student does not feel intimidated to ask a "dumb" question.

Numerous interviewees perceived that Central teachers genuinely cared about their students. Emily said, "They care about you individually. You're not just a student in the classroom and I have to get through this period of teaching. They actually care about how you're doing and what's going on in your life." Gracie believed their attitude was "Hey, I'm here to help you succeed. I'm on your side. I'm willing to take time out of my day to make sure that you have a good experience and to make sure that you're just doing well."

According to students, teachers are consistently available for extra academic help and also "just for talking." Elijah said, "Some teachers want to have their lunch to themselves, but our teachers would help you during lunch or after school or just about any time you want."

Students perceived their teachers were also available to talk about life beyond course content. Emily said, "You can really ask them anything. It doesn't even have to be about schoolwork. They're kind of like your mentors, not just teachers. If I ever have questions about Christianity, faith, or what I'm going through, I know I can always go to one of the teachers. They can really help you through things in your life, so that's what I really enjoy." Inga called the teachers "life mentors."

Stacey commented that she liked the way teachers taught their classes. She appreciated the hands-on activities "which for me, help me learn." Another student said even though she didn't love the field of science in general, she enjoyed the study of insects as well as pig anatomy and dissection. One mother said, "It's not all sitting ... and listening to something. It's many different things." Another parent would agree; she seldom heard her children complain about doing unnecessary work. "When they're here, they're learning. They have homework. But I don't feel like they're getting assigned busy work."

*Classes.* Three content areas were repeatedly identified as being academic strengths at Central: math, science, and music. In math and science, students are challenged to take part in competitions and events, such as an aptitude test in engineering, math competitions, and Science Olympiad. Dave said these academic activities can offer a good substitute for more electives. He said students love activities when you get them involved, and then “they want to come back next year and the year after.” Dave added that not only are these experiences a good tool for learning, but they are also “a way to gauge how we are doing with respect to other schools.”



Students enjoy taking music classes. As a result, the music program attracts a lot of people, especially choir and orchestra. One teacher said, “Our music teachers are phenomenal.” Emily commented that because this was a “music-oriented school,” she could take music theory and play an instrument almost every day. Gracie said that the overall experience of making music together as a community enhances the overall atmosphere at Central.

The strength of the music program at Central is not only recognized by Central constituents, but by external evaluators as well. Choirs get superior ratings year after year. One teacher stated, “I would argue that [our choir teacher] is one of the best choral directors in the Mennonite church.” Someone estimated that more than 90% of the students have participated in choir for at least one year.

The Performing Arts Center (PAC) at Central Christian is well-equipped with a fairly new music wing which houses classrooms, practice rooms, and offices. Performances are enhanced with a new piano, instruments, risers, classrooms, and good acoustics in the auditorium. Music is a visible strength at Central Christian. “It’s just what we do,” said Allison. “Soccer players (or the volleyball team) have been known to get up and break into four-part harmony. I think it’s just unique.”



Central’s students can take advantage of several AP, dual-enrollment, and other college-level classes. Inga said her daughter was receiving help on finding a college from the guidance counselor. Alumni occasionally report that “we just reviewed what we learned in high school.” Before sending her kids to Central, Tammy wondered whether she should worry about rigor. However, after having two college graduates, she is not concerned because she said her children did not struggle in college and now articulate that Central prepared them well. Scott said he and his parents were also aware of college preparation when they looked at different schools because “it’s hard not to notice that the public high school offers a lot more AP and honors courses than Central. And I’ve always been interested in taking challenging courses. So I wondered if I would outgrow the school, and if I would be kind of stuck taking these classes that I could just sleep through and get easy A’s. But what I found is that the teachers are there to challenge you with as much as you can handle. Again and again my teachers say we’re going to run into this in college.”

*Standards.* Gene and Dave both talked about state standards. Faculty made a conscious decision to engage in a three-year process to incorporate state requirements into their teaching because they believe the public sector expects it and they do not want to disadvantage their students. However, Gene said, “We do have the freedom to deviate when we want to, or if it infringes on our core beliefs. It’s kind of a win/win.”

*Mini Term.* During the first two weeks of every January, Central Christian coordinates and manages a mini-term. It is a time to focus on something different and to learn outside the classroom. Potential mini-terms are proposed by either teachers or parents, and students sign up for their choices. Among other things, students have participated in marine biology in Florida, birding in Canada, trip to New York, hiking, cooking, scrapbooking, photography, journaling, wood carving, remodeling a house, home repair, mechanical work, or auto mechanics.

Many mini-terms are specifically designed to provide service opportunities students would not have otherwise. One group experienced skiing and service at Laurelville Camp. Allison led a mini-term on campus where the students sewed a comforter and then donated it to Mennonite Central Committee or the CCS auction. Other mini-term experiences that emphasize service have included a trip to the Hopi Indian Reservation in Arizona or Adriel School in Ohio.

Tammy expressed appreciation for this opportunity for her children when she said, “Some of the mini-terms that they do here are genius. It's real life. They learn so much. You can't take a trip to Washington DC and not learn stuff. And the timing is perfect right after Christmas break.”

### *Final Words*

When Superintendent Gene was complimented on the many positive comments made at Central, he said, “I would like to take credit for it, but [faculty and staff] have worked way ahead of me in doing things and being ahead. I just try to fit in and not ruin it.”

Teacher Dave summed up his satisfaction with Central when he said, “I love the kids. I really enjoy this whole community experience that I’ve been fortunate to be a part of for 39 years. Teaching is a gift and I just love it.”

Student Scott was so complimentary about Central that when suggesting that he would be a good salesman for the school, he said, “It would not be very hard for me to be. Not hard at all.”

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*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.*

