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

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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 the fall of 2014 to determine the strengths and distinctives of the school related to school atmosphere, academics, and faith development. I visited Christopher Dock Mennonite High School on September 24-25, 2014 and interviewed 25 participants: 12 students, four teachers, six parents, one administrator, and an administrative assistant. 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 Christopher Dock Mennonite 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 Christopher Dock 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 Christopher Dock 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 Christopher Dock Mennonite High School?

"Igniting Passion for Learning, Faith, and Life"

Christopher Dock Mennonite High School was founded in the 1950's. It was named after a man by the same name who had a long teaching career among rural Mennonites in the area. Today it also serves a broad range of other denominations as a local Christian high school with a reputation for quality education. The school is located in Lansdale, a small town in the southeastern area of Pennsylvania.



Christopher Dock High School serves 354 students in grades 9-12. 28% of the student body are ethnically diverse or from non-white backgrounds. 17% of the total number of students are international students, this year mostly from Asian countries. 43% are from a Mennonite background.

Students at Christopher Dock are supported by 31 faculty members (includes a guidance counselor and librarian) and five administrators. In addition, 35 full- and part-time staff members provide support for both students and other employees in the school.

Mission: Christopher Dock Mennonite High School, in partnership with the family and the church, seeks to develop the God-given abilities of students in preparation for responsible stewardship of life as members of God's people in a global society. Christopher Dock serves youth and families of Franconia Mennonite Conference, Eastern District Conference and those who share Anabaptist values.



*Conrad Swartzentruber
Principal*

Christopher Dock Mennonite High School
1000 Forty Foot Road
Lansdale, PA 19446
Principal: Conrad Swartzentruber
Head of School: Richard Thomas
<http://www.dockhs.org/home>

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.

Key Strengths: What's Working at Christopher Dock?

The most significant strengths discovered from the participants of this study were related to the environment at Christopher Dock – physical, social/emotional, spiritual, and academic. This report is organized around the description of these themes.

Environment

“Dock is our identity, and I think that’s kind of special in itself,” said Jack, a senior student. He talked about how the overall environment of Christopher Dock High School helped shape his life. Another student, freshman Natalie said, “I like it here because I can find a way to tie... a little bit of everything in with God and it’s just the overall environment – teachers, students, and chapel.” Kim, a parent of three Dock students, expressed a similar feeling when she said, “It’s an unbelievable community. My last daughter is a senior here and she is literally dreading the day she graduates because she doesn’t want to leave.”

Christopher Dock’s size was an attractive characteristic for many people. A faculty member said Dock was the “ideal size because a sense of community can be developed with this number of students. We have talked about growing, but ... it just feels like our size is a tremendous strength.” Seth, vice president of the senior class, perceived that knowing fellow students was important, and he thought the size of the school facilitated those connections. He said, “You’re always seeing people you know in the hallways and always talking to people. There’s never a time during the day when I’m not with someone that I don’t know at some level.”



Dock is recognized as a “community,” defined in a variety of ways. Grant, a junior, said it feels like a community because he knows most everyone, which makes him feel comfortable around school.

Because it’s small, “it’s easier to get to know people, which kind of opens new doors because you may meet someone that’s a sophomore and then they introduce you to more sophomores, or you may meet someone that’s a senior and then you get introduced to more seniors.” Mr. Wiens, assistant principal, said community is evident for some students who go out for breakfast every Thursday morning on their way to school. He said they meet at 6:30 at a local place. There are also times when he eats breakfast with students, and other times when faculty meet with other faculty for breakfast on Friday.

Teachers also sensed community and collegiality with other faculty at Dock. Social studies teacher Mr. Hertzler articulated how he perceived Dock to be a community for faculty: “We meet once a week in a faculty meeting, and you know, it is an opportunity to share stuff that’s happening to you and to encourage each other as teachers. So that really is an example of community -- that’s how I would define it.” He went on to describe this bond: “[Faculty] give and receive counsel from each other. We are able to share burdens, successes, and joys. And I feel we’re able to sense the spirit of God in lots of stuff that we do.”

Social studies teacher Mr. Bower also commented that faculty meetings were not just meetings for professional development. He said, “We’re there hearing not only about what’s going well, but also what challenges and struggles we’re experiencing.” Mrs. Grega, learning support teacher, appreciated that in every faculty meeting, “somehow Dr. Swartzentruber picks out something great that’s happened in a classroom that week, and he shares it with the rest of the faculty. The last thing he says is ‘Keep up the good work. You all have been doing great stuff.’”

Mr. Hertzler expressed his belief that community existed not just between faculty, but between faculty and students too: “That’s experienced in a variety of ways, some of which happens in a classroom and some of it happens in-between the classes. We have always had this tradition of a long [40-minute] lunch, and one of the things that’s made it difficult to get rid of is that there are naturally wonderful connections that occur in those social moments.” He went on to say that as he’s gotten older, he has become better at relating to students. “It’s the idea of connecting with students and trying to walk with them in those moments where they need academic, social, or spiritual help. And some of those things are also reflected in how they relate to each other, which again, could be a definition of community. So I try to encourage that as the adult here, but then also try to live it as a teacher, too.”

More than one teacher pointed out the good relationship faculty have with administration. They believed administrators were approachable and listened to faculty and staff. One said, “I know there’s always an open door to the administration.” Mr. Bower considered the supportive atmosphere from administration to be one of the reasons faculty get along so well. He said there was support between colleagues, from administration, and from the Board. He said, “I feel both trusted and supported. And I think it allows me to take risks. I also think students benefit because they notice when faculty get along too.”

Administrative Council, a weekly meeting with the principal, vice principal, and three elected teachers, meets once a week to handle questions, issues, or problems either the administration or faculty may bring to the group. “To me,” said Mrs. Grega, “that’s another collaborative effort where teachers feel they have a voice instead of experience top-down leadership.”

Staff and faculty said they enjoy coming to work. Staff member Mrs. Gehman said, “I just really enjoy and appreciate the people I work with. I enjoy the students and their parents and the teachers and my colleagues -- it’s just a good place to work.”

Physical environment.

Christopher Dock has a rich and fascinating history. According to Mr. Hertzler, the property was once owned by a Quaker family, the Lueckens, and was a stop on the Underground Railroad. In addition, during the Revolutionary War, President George Washington stayed very near where the school now sits. One of the army generals was killed and buried at what is now Towemencin Mennonite Church a few miles away.

The Christopher Dock community enjoys a beautiful and adequate campus. One person said, “Our facilities are



stellar. We have a wonderful gym, beautiful theatre, stadium with a turf field, beautiful library, and buildings with a lot of natural light.” Another said, “We are blessed with a campus that has whatever we need.” Because you cannot see much of campus from the road, Mrs. Brown, the librarian, said a parent once said to her, “This is the best kept secret in Montgomery County!”

Green spaces and gathering places are located between buildings, many of them named for generous donors. Mr. Hertzler commented “the four seasons happen here in dramatic ways because we can be outside and notice them.” Cole, a junior student, said when you go from class to class, “it’s almost like you get a break because you’re outside. You can just relax a little bit, and then go to your next class.”

Students talked about the freedom to “hang out,” with available spaces to do so. They enjoyed the option to be in the Commons area if they did not have a class or Study Hall. Seth said they could go out and sit next to the pond and study. Or “you can even talk [at the pond] because it’s a privilege -- it’s up to you.” Another student, Grant, said “I like to fish, so sometimes I skip lunch and fish during lunch.” Seth believed that Dock’s spaces and places helped students connect to each other. He said, “You are never really alone during the day all that much.”



The physical environment has also been used to create places of connection for faculty in the same departments. Mr. Hertzler credited former principal Elaine Moyer with the move to physically locate each of the departments in one area. He added, “So now, for example, all of our Bible and Social Studies people are on this wing. It makes such a difference – we hang out and we do our business with a cup of coffee in the morning or after school, and those kind of things really strengthen your connection to each other.” He stated that another benefit for teaching in the same vicinity was that it also helps with collaboration in teaching.

Social and emotional environment.

Sean was a senior student who rode the train every day from Philadelphia. His main thoughts on Christopher Dock’s strengths were the social and emotional environment, even though at first it put him out of his comfort zone of the big city. He described what he meant by environment: “Everyone here -- the people, the teachers, everyone is friendly. Everybody is caring and wants you to succeed. The people here are just great.” He went on to give an example: “My freshman year I didn’t know where half the classes were so seniors would take time out from where they were going and help me get to my class so I could get familiar with the school. People are just happy here. They’ve always got a smile on their face and they’re happy they’re here.”



Sean said people at Dock care enough to help you in any way they can. He said, “If you have a problem and you look down, people will pull you to the side and ask you if you’re okay, and then you can talk about things.” Mr. Wiens connected the care of students to a strong desire on

the part of faculty and staff to stay within the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition. He believed there were other directions one could go as a Christian school, but he said, “I think this one is really working. This school values the traditional rootedness, even though we are here in the 21st century. I think that's pretty important, because it is not possible in a lot of other places.”

Adults at Dock see themselves as mentors to students. Mr. Wiens referred to a current senior student who is now a leader in his class. “Last year I tapped him on the shoulder, knowing that I wanted to start grooming him for leadership. A few weeks ago, the student got baptized in his home church, and he asked me to introduce him to the congregation. What an honor.”

Teachers. “I would say the number one strength of Christopher Dock is its teachers,” said Jack. Jesse, a junior, said the same thing when he was asked about the strengths of Dock: “Well, the teachers for sure!” Jack went on to explain: “I think you have a faculty, and staff for that matter, that is really the key to students and the community as a whole. They also have an expertise in their areas of interest and in the school subjects they teach. In my experience, they’re also totally accessible and available to help. Even teachers that are not so much in your area of interest, math for me, are still committed to your comprehensive learning here at Dock.” Many students identified by name a wide variety of specific teachers they have learned to appreciate for these particular reasons.

Mr. Gordon, parent of three Dock children and a staff member in Advancement, told another story to illustrate how teachers “bend over backwards to help students.” He said, “There’s a teacher here who all last year had lunch with a group of three girls who had recently lost a loved one in their family. She took it upon herself to be available for these girls, be a shoulder to cry on, and listen. That kind of stuff just blows me away. Teachers don’t have to do that. And it’s all in an effort to help kids learn.”

Sonia, a senior Korean student, was impressed that her teachers knew so much about other subjects. She said, “They know so much. They know about math. They know about science. They have a lot to give.” She shared that she was really influenced by her teachers, whether she had them for a class or not – “more than I am by students or by the actual academic work.” Seth believed that one of the reasons teachers at Dock were tops was because they had been at the school for a long time, 25 or 30 years. Because many of them once taught the parents of current students, he said there is a lot of respect for them. “Plus, because they’ve been doing this for so long, they know what works and what doesn’t.”

Cole said that in his classes, unlike in his previous school, teachers give more individual attention and focus on each person rather than consistently address the whole class as if they all learn the same way. Jessica, a junior from Korea, articulated her appreciation for teachers who “spend their time personally with a student and also work to build relationships with them.”

Teachers help students find their strengths, as articulated by both parents and students. Dawn, a parent of four daughters, said she thinks teachers put forth a genuine effort along the way to find



giftedness in students and then to nurture that gift. In one continuous string, Natalie identified three teachers and what they've meant to her. She said the reason she now likes writing so much is because [her English teacher] took the time to acknowledge her skills and asked her to join the school writing staff. "I never felt like I was too good at anything, so he helped me have confidence in my ability to write. That meant a lot to me because I've never had a teacher do that for me before. That's care." She also talked about an administrator who "always checks up on me to see how I'm doing because he knew I was having financial trouble coming here." Additionally, [another teacher] consistently "reminds me she's happy I'm here because she remembers me from my eighth-grade interview. It is nice that she remembers me."

Mrs. Grega was in her 13th year at Christopher Dock. She said in her 35 years of a teaching career, this is the happiest she's been. "Christopher Dock has been the best place of all these schools." She attributes most of it to the tone of the school. She was used to rules, regulations, and penalties for students. But when she came to Dock and learned about the restorative justice attitude towards discipline and experienced it herself with some behavioral issues in her classes, she realized that the only way to change students is to teach them with respect and dignity. She said, "It is a Mennonite concept that all God's children deserve to be loved. So that's how I was changed from being a Catholic disciplinarian to having the Mennonite restorative justice philosophy!"

Mrs. Grega credited Mr. Wiens for reminding her and other teachers to never give up on students, no matter how frustrated you might be. She said, "Our vice principal always says we don't know how this school impacts kids sometimes until five years down the road. We may graduate a good number of kids that didn't get it while they were here, that have horrible behavior, and buck the system. Then all of a sudden they're doing amazing things in the world because of what they learned here." Mr. Bower said, "Sometimes we remind ourselves that we're planting seeds. And we might not see the full growth by the time students are seniors, but we pray and trust that we are planting seeds for the future. Dr. Swartzentruber has been helpful to frequently offer that type of encouragement to us."

Parents articulated their appreciation for teachers' communication with them regarding their child's classwork or behavior. One parent said he had written e-mails to teachers and had them returned to him at 10 pm. When his daughter was struggling, he appreciated the "heads up" on an issue he could then deal with at home more judiciously. He also valued parent voice when there have been issues of potential concern, indicating that conversations have facilitated effective solutions.

Another parent told the story of her son who was intelligent, but smart enough to figure out that he only had to do "so much" in order to get by at school. He disliked the school he was attending and was ready to quit. But he was also a talented baseball player and musician, playing with a contemporary Christian band and leading in his church youth group. With the help of financial aid, Dock recruited him to become a student. After that his attitude changed and his talents were recognized. He led chapels "and all kinds of things he would never have had the opportunity to do if he hadn't come here," said his mom.

Spiritual environment.

On the top of one dad's list of what he most appreciated about Christopher Dock was that his daughter could be "publicly faithful" to God and her faith. He also credited chapel as a way to be "recharged" daily. He saw it as a discipline that was "growth-producing."

Chapel. A chapel committee, this year made up of about 30 volunteer students, meets during lunch once a week. They plan the speakers and the schedule for worship and prayer in order to "engage the whole population at Dock." Kylie, a senior, considered chapel to be a big part of her spiritual life. She serves on the chapel committee and said, "I usually connect with God most through music, and so being asked to sing in front of Chapel or lead the worship team is a really big part of my spiritual journey and I love it so much." Natalie also liked gathering in chapel as a whole community "because the entire school is there listening to the word of God and that's really nice."



Junior student Grant also said he enjoyed going to chapel. He talked about this year's Spiritual Life Emphasis Week, and said, "One of the days really spoke to me a lot. The special speaker talked about how we often don't recognize that our problems are not problems to people in third-world countries. She showed us a video of people in Africa speaking about first-world problems such as, 'I hate it when my gum loses its flavor.' or 'I hate it when the ice melts in my cold drink.' And it really hits you, because you're like, 'Why do I even complain about that? It doesn't matter. And these people don't even have food or water. And they're even happy to find dirty water to drink. And they're still happy people.' So that kind of just puts it into perspective because in the big scheme of things, it doesn't matter if you can't charge your cell phone or if your burger comes with pickles when you've asked for no pickles. You know, it just doesn't matter!"

On Friday of that special week, the planned chapel was a time of reflection and open-mic sharing. According to Seth, a lot of people spoke; in fact, they had to cut people off because of the time. Jesse also talked about the Friday sharing time when he said, "People just kept on coming up—it was really surprising. I didn't think anyone would want to do it, but it was really cool to hear what people had to say and share what they were thinking."

Students seemed to prefer that faculty or other students lead or speak in chapel. But some outside speakers were also memorable to them. Jack, who said he likes public policy and law, gave an example of one he specifically remembered. He said, "We had a Montgomery County judge talk about how he incorporates his faith into his decision-making while also advocating for religious freedom. He sort of made me think about how to balance not only societal issues, but personal issues as well." Jack was also touched by the story of a woman who was an alcoholic in her high school and college years and then had a very bad car accident. He said she used her faith in God to work through that and to heal and recover.

Perhaps as a result of learning to articulate their faith journey in classes, sometimes students choose to share their stories in chapel or a larger setting. Barb, the librarian, commented that "more and more you see students talking in chapel, which is really pretty great. I think those are

the chapels that students remember. They seem to have more of an impact when the students get up and talk. And I'm amazed at how many are vulnerable enough to do that. We had a chapel just a couple weeks ago where there were some seniors who shared. One student said, 'If you had told me as a freshman that I would be standing in front of chapel as a senior, I wouldn't have believed it.'" Barb added, "Considering this student's story, it was unbelievable. [She] didn't say she had it all together, but was willing to stand up in front and share very personally."

Jesse commented that one student from the chapel committee had just asked him that day to speak in an upcoming chapel. He said, "I'm a hunter, so they asked me to talk about where I see God in nature. I hadn't really considered it before, but as I thought about it today, I do realize how beautiful it is, seeing all the different little animals running around. It's kind of cool [that they asked me]."

Teachers integrate faith into their content areas. Jessica articulated it this way: "Every teacher tries to introduce students to Christianity and bring God into their teaching. Even in our AP economics class, I learn about God. I was like, 'What? Do I learn God in Economics and Spanish class?' But yes, in every class we learn about God, faith, and things like that."



Faith is strengthened. Comments made by students confirmed that their spiritual lives have been strengthened at Dock. Sean credited the school with helping him know who God is: "At Dock, people will always talk about God and tell you that God loves you. It helped me strengthen my relationship with God because I know I can talk to him more and things like that."

But Sean, a basketball player, commented that Christopher Dock had taught him much more than how to play basketball. He said, "Here they teach you how to be a man in life and also a leader. They teach that it's not only about winning and sports, but it's about doing it because you love it." Sean said Dock was teaching him how to be a student, an athlete, and a Christian.

Sean shared an example from his own experience of how staff at Dock helped him have the attitude he described above. He said in his freshman year he had a coach named Jake that left in the middle of the season because he wanted to become a pastor. Jake has continued to stay in touch with Sean, and he consistently encourages Sean in his Christian life. Sean said, "He talks to me about how he wants me to live as a good Christian man, how he will help me towards that, and that he's praying for me. He's invited me to his church and talked to me about all my problems. I know I can always call on him. He's just helped me a lot."

Another student with a faith-strengthening story was Jimmy, a senior. He said before Dock he didn't go to church at all. "But," he said, "a lot of my friends go to church every week, so I felt like I was behind in that area. Over the summer I actually experimented with going to church again, and I found it very beneficial. So then I noticed that I had grown in my faith during these four years here. So just the environment where people believe in you and don't force you to do anything influences you in a natural way."

Cole talked about how much better he's doing at Dock than he was before he came. He said it was his parent's idea for him to attend because "I was getting in trouble a lot, and I had some bad friend groups. But now I'm glad I came here. I feel like I can focus better in class, and get better help when I need it. It's just an overall better environment for friends and everything, and it just keeps you out of trouble better." Cole added that his parents frequently tell him they've seen a whole different person from the person he was before. He said he also notices a difference in himself. He said, "I'm happier too. I would come home and I wouldn't talk to anybody or I'd always have an attitude with my parents. I never got along with anybody. But now I can talk to people at home about my day and everything, so it's better."



Sean summed up his assessment of how Christopher Dock influences students in faith: "Everything about how the school runs is about faith in God."

Diverse beliefs are accepted. With different denominations, religions, and backgrounds being represented at Dock, students are exposed to a variety of perspectives. But Kylie said teachers don't expect you to have the same opinions as they do, and they're okay with that. "They are not forcing you to believe what they believe." Jack, an Episcopalian, said he had no problem with differences between his denomination and Mennonite values. He said, "There are differences, and not to get all philosophical, but I do think there's much more in the foundations of faith that bring Christians together than divides them." One student said in his previous church-affiliated school, he only learned about their denomination's tenets, "but here freshman year was very unique because I took Bible I, and we went through different parts of the Bible, which I found very interesting."

Jessica also expressed satisfaction in that "all teachers are open to all kinds of students, no matter what religion you are." She assumed most teachers were from a Mennonite background, but because she personally was not, she said, "I like that they're open to students other than those from that denomination."

Not only students, but teachers of non-Mennonite backgrounds also appreciated the respect for other faith perspectives. Mrs. Grega said, "As a Catholic, I was very worried about that when I came here. But I was welcomed, and in my first year, I was asked to speak on Ash Wednesday with a Catholic student on Catholic perspectives of Lent and Ash Wednesday. For me, that was – 'Wow. This school really cares about what other people believe.'" She affirmed that Dock has managed to keep Anabaptist values and themes infused in every class—math, English, or art. Jimmy, a Catholic student, said when he came to Dock he thought he would find a lot of things that were different, but instead, "I found that Catholic and Mennonites are actually very similar. That was surprising to me."

Chris was a tenth grader who was also raised a Catholic and holds on to that belief system. He said he appreciates how Dock presents the idea of faith. "They don't force religion down your throat; they bring it to you gently and as an option. It's kind of there and it's not – it's for you to take. I think a lot of students take advantage of that because they slowly start to realize what it is. You're surrounded by it but you're not suffocated by it."

Jack believed that acceptance of other people was what made Dock unique. He said, “I think you see a committed effort from mostly everyone on campus to engage other people, including folks that are not exactly like them or have a different background, or even a different belief system. I think that is the significant and distinguishing part of the Dock lifestyle.”

Not only in Bible classes, but throughout the school, teachers were praised for their influence on students’ spiritual lives. Kylie called it the “spirituality of our teachers.” Dawn called it a “living faith.” She said faith is incorporated in other classes besides the Bible courses. Students expressed how approachable their teachers were both inside and outside of the classroom. Kylie said, “If I’m struggling with my spiritual life, I can go to one of my favorite teachers and talk to him about Christianity or anything under the sun.” Chris’ comment was similar: “I think the benefit of Dock is that you can interact with almost any teacher about anything.” He referenced an English teacher that “really made me think and have an open mind about things.”

Rather than indoctrinate, students are allowed to ask tough questions and express doubts in a safe environment, and yet be assured that they can still have a strong and positive relationship with God while they are in the midst of those feelings. Mr. Bower commented that he would much rather see students feel open and share their thoughts “rather than keep them inside and be turned off by religion. If they’re in a safe enough place where they can share and communicate that to someone, I think that speaks a lot to the environment that we have set up here.”

Academic Environment

Repeated comments were made about the quality of education at Christopher Dock: “They have a reputation for excellence.” “Dock has a good academic program.” “A lot of people come out of [Dock] with a good education.” The adults making these statements acknowledged that local school districts had good schools too, but their perception was that Dock excelled in the academic area.

According to Mr. Gordon, Christopher Dock teachers seem less concerned about making sure students can regurgitate information as they do in helping them think critically. “They don’t just teach the facts and figures and formulas. They teach you how to think and to think for yourself, whether it is in the area of faith or worldview. Teachers encourage students to think for themselves, debate, and discuss what they’re learning. That’s a real strength of Christopher Dock.”

Bible classes. Students shared what was most influential to them related to faith development: chapel, Bible classes, and faculty modeling. A curriculum is in place for teaching Old and New Testaments, Story of the Church, and courses that apply Biblical principles. According to Mr. Bower, “within that curriculum, there’s a lot of intentional faith development where we’re encouraging students to be able to articulate, ‘What do you believe?’ And also, maybe more importantly, ‘Why do you believe it?’”

Two Bible classes in particular were mentioned by students as being favorited: *Kingdom Living* and *Faith Walk*. Parents also identified these classes as being good ones because of what their children said about them at home.

Kingdom Living is a required class for seniors. The curriculum catalog for Christopher Dock says the course is designed for Biblical understanding of “what it means for kingdom citizens to view life’s choices within the context of peace and justice, nonconformity to the world’s standards, stewardship, and mission.” Mr. Hertzler, the teacher, said it allows him to teach “an alternative to conflict and violence and to talk about peace in a variety of places and perspectives, all from a Biblical perspective.” He said he is grateful that he is allowed, and actually encouraged, in a school culture like Dock to take something he feels so strongly about, and then “explore ways to communicate it with students and have them work at articulating their own perspective on the issue.”



Mr. Hertzler, in his 38th year at Dock, said *Kingdom Living* is another example “of a school that works really hard at trying to have a sense of connection with the past, but also still needs to wrestle with the realities of the present and the future.” In order to make the course relevant to personal experience and growth, *Kingdom Living* also includes the choice of an off-campus experience focused on service, a week-long job-shadow of a potential career, or a combination of the two options.

Faith Walk is an elective class for seniors that enables them to explore their faith and share about their relationship to Christ and their own spiritual journey. According to Kylie, “Faith Walk is really big.” Mr. Wiens, the instructor, stated that this year about 60 out of 90 seniors have signed up to take the course. As a parent, Dawn appreciated that “someone in high leadership who is responsible for discipline” teaches such an important class because of the statement it makes to students.



Kim said her daughter loved her *Faith Walk* class. It is “judgment free” and trust is developed as participants discuss what’s happening in their lives and where they are personally with their faith. Kim believed it was an opportunity for them to talk freely and openly, and even “let their guard down.” She said, “Students don’t feel like there’s a right or wrong answer, and they learn from each other. Kids at that age love that.” Mr. Wiens said Dock is intentional about creating that safe environment where kids feel accepted and know “we’re all in this together.” Seth shared that because students develop a close bond with every other student in the class, “you grow as a class and as a Christian.”

One of the components of *Faith Walk* is a three-day spiritual retreat at a local Mennonite camp. Students help develop the schedule and provide some of the input for campfire leading and worship music. The retreat usually starts with a prayer labyrinth, has some faculty input, and provides for times of personal reflection, writing, and sharing. Another activity of the weekend is to delve into the book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, by Richard Foster. In small groups, students focus on one chapter of the book and determine the main points, which they then share with the rest of the students.

One student saw the progression of Bible classes this way: “As you grow older you start to get more modern in your faith and your Bible classes. Last year I was a junior and our class was

about the Church, starting after Jesus died, going through how [Christians] survived, and ending up with the Mennonite Church and how it got to what it is today.”

Chris said that for him, Bible classes were the biggest spiritual influence on his faith. Because of open class discussions, “two of my teachers gave me a really open mind and kind of challenged me to ask questions about my faith. I think when you ask questions about your faith, it will grow.” He went on to explain it was helpful to learn that faith is a belief and not a fact. And for those who believe there is only one right way to live and have a closed minded attitude, “it kind of affects who you are, and also your potential and your learning. So if we do have faith that God is real, we need to be open to questions about our faith and doubts. [My two teachers] really challenged me to think about that.”

Jack also said Bible classes at Dock had the most impact on his spiritual life. He admitted, “Personally, I never really studied Scripture and the Christian faith extensively until last year in what was called our Story of the Church class, which was basically our Junior Bible class. And so for me, I learned a ton about the history of the church and how to incorporate it into present-day Christian issues.”

Bible courses set a spiritual foundation for the rest of a student’s life at Dock. Mr. Hertzler shared, “I can sense something significant here, something important. And of course I try to model that. We try to model it at school in a variety of ways – chapels, classes, and even conversations. And then the hope is that as we plant the seed, this will be important enough that it will continue to grow when students leave here.”

Content area classes. There was an appreciation for the wide variety of classes from which students had to choose, as illustrated by Jimmy: “I think we have a lot of unique courses here.” One student said she was honestly quite surprised at the classes offered. She admitted she had a stereotype that a Christian school would be less academic than a public school, but she was pleased with the opportunities she had.

Several classes were highlighted as being unique. Jack was looking forward to taking an English class called Literature of War and Conflict, one he saw as being “heavy,” but potentially interesting. Global Citizens focuses on the world, as well as international topics and perspectives. Students can take four or five levels of Spanish. Spanish V, an AP class, addresses current and classic Hispanic literature. Kathy said, “There’s another feather in Dock’s cap!”

In a required social studies class called Conflict Resolution, Kylie said she learned what kind of person she was as it relates to conflict, and as a result, she knows better how to handle herself in future situations so she can “go about conflict in a positive way.” Mr. Bower said the course may not be seen as one for college preparation, but it is about life preparation. “Everybody is going to experience conflict, and that’s something we feel strongly about, especially from an Anabaptist perspective. But if our students communicate and know how to resolve conflict, I think we’re confident it will prepare them quite well for anything they get into.”

Several students spoke highly of the weighted grading scale Dock used. Sean said, “An A for us is like a 94 and a B is like an 86. It is a couple points higher than what [some] schools have. So if you want an A you really have to put work into it.” He said the extra things you do for an A

challenge you and push you to “think a lot.” Natalie also liked the grading system because “I know if I get a good grade I’m doing really well, and that makes me proud of myself.” She said, “I also want to be challenged, even if I’m not that great at some stuff.” Natalie added, “Even if you don’t go to college, Dock prepares you for life because it gives you a mindset to work hard.”

College Prep. It was the perception of parents and students that classes were rigorous and prepared students for college. Jimmy also appreciated the availability of many options: regular classes, AP and Honors courses, or advanced courses from a charter or online school. Jack perceived that advanced placement and honors classes would also look good on transcripts, and then translate into college admissions.

Sean added a similar comment when he said, “You type up a lot of papers and you read a lot. And you’ve got to annotate and things like that. They pretty much make sure that you’re on the right track so when you get to college it’s not hard for you.” Parents with children who were now in college said that looking back, their children were grateful for receiving the preparation they did. Dawn said she would highly affirm the language arts area at Dock. She believed her daughters knew far better than their college-age peers how to write, edit, and rework a paper. In addition, she said they understand research and how to make presentations. Numerous people gave credit to the English department for going a great job teaching how to write and communicate well.

Cole expressed the thought that Dock teachers “slowly work you into college level.” He said at his previous school, it was “here’s the work--just do it. But here they show you how and they support you as you work your way into it.” However, he said you still have to do the work because “out in the real world, no one is going to hold your hand. So it’s good that teachers step back and just kind of look over your shoulder to see when you need more help.”

Seth believed that a student can push himself as much as he wants with the availability of advanced classes. However, some do not prefer that option. He said, “There’s advanced math, calculus, statistics, and more if you want them. People can really get high GPAs by taking those classes and doing well in them, but at the same time we offer classes that are suited for everyone at their own learning level.”



Mr. Wiens shared that the staff is constantly evaluating how to balance all the requirements for courses, rigor, and college preparation. “We are often critical of ourselves in what else we can be doing or should be doing. But I think we have responded well to the need of college-prep courses, while at the same time providing a strong learning support program.”

Learning Support. Not only do Dock students have an opportunity to take rigorous classes, but they also receive help when they struggle. Tutoring is available, sometimes by upperclassmen. “The learning support here is strong,” said Seth.

Teachers are skilled at recognizing a student’s abilities or lack thereof. One mom said her son came to Dock and was placed in a math class that was a level above where he should have been placed. She said the guidance counselor talked to the son first and then called up the parents to

present the idea of moving him to the appropriate level. She said, “I just thanked him for recognizing [my son’s] ability at an early stage instead of making him struggle for weeks or a semester or the rest of the year. After getting a poor grade, my son might have just given up. In addition, I was so appreciative that he had talked with my son first and recognized that he also had a say in his academic program. I think my son and I both felt we were a part of a team of three.”

Few small private high schools have a teacher certified in special education, but Christopher Dock does, and people spoke highly of her. Mrs. Grega teaches Directed Studies, a credit-based option where the need is determined with parents and teachers working together. The class allows students to get course work done with the help of a learning support teacher. Mrs. Grega said the goal is to provide learning support in a mainstream environment, but each year they have more students that fit the profile for learning plans which require additional daily help.



Mrs. Grega said her philosophy of education is that every child can learn, no matter how their brain functions. “But I think in order to get students to really relate to a teacher, you need to build a relationship with them first, and they need to trust me because many of them come damaged from something related to education in their past when teachers told them they were dumb or they weren’t acceptable.” As a result of this realization, Mrs. Grega said she gives up content for most of the first month in order to build trust in one another. “I tell my students they all have different abilities and disabilities, so together we need to figure out how to get going with the learning.” Mrs. Grega also encourages students to work with their teachers. “If there’s a problem, I can model for them how to talk with teachers in a classroom, with the ultimate goal of self-advocacy.” She repeated her belief that relationship-building is one of the pillars of Christopher Dock.

Electives. Dock has a variety of electives from which junior and senior students can choose. Grant said his favorite class was an elective, Culinary Arts, where he learns new skills, tries different recipes, learns about food diseases, and “how important it is to keep a clean kitchen.” He described the family and consumer science area as a classroom, several full kitchens, commercial refrigerator and freezer, and also a handicap-accessible kitchen for anyone who has disabilities. Another student, Jesse, said he never has trouble finding a class he is interested in taking. He usually signs up for an art class, such as ceramics, but he said there are all kinds of band and orchestra classes from which to choose as well. John said his daughter, a senior at Dock, enjoys the visual arts so much she has an independent studio at school where she can do her photography and art work. Dock has enhanced and encouraged her with those talents.

The performing arts are strong choices as well. Robin, parent of six (five alumni and one senior) said that “[Dock’s] academics, their arts, their music, their athletics – across the board – surpass what we experienced in our previous school.” She said her son was in the musical *Les Miserables*, and before the performance, she was prepared to be disappointed. Instead, she said, “I was absolutely blown away by the performance. Barring one or two, we’ve come to every musical in these 12 years, and they are all just phenomenal.” Robin also said of the touring choir, “I can’t believe the sound [the music director] gets out of those kids when he only has a

couple hundred to select from.” Dawn spoke of her daughter’s passion for theatre productions and how much fun she had playing a particular role in one of the school plays.

Application of content and faith. Jack mentioned that no matter what the subject, teachers frequently incorporated “the subjects that we’re learning into everyday life, and into the future as well.” He shared an example from an AP Government class he took the previous year. It was the day after primary elections in May, and the class discussion inspired him to be a voting citizen. While he was not yet 18, the legal age for voting, he realized that in Pennsylvania you could register to vote when you were age 17. He said, “And so the day after the primary I went straight to the voter registration office at the courthouse and registered. I think that was one way that I personally translated a class into live action.”



Mr. Bower spoke from a former student and now a teacher perspective when he highlighted Dock’s *Building Community* curriculum, in place since the late 90s. For each year, the curriculum includes something intentional for the purpose of building community. For example, in ninth grade the students experience an orientation for a couple of days at the beginning of the year when they meet as an entire freshman class and also with advisor groups. For sophomores there are required service hours connected to the Bible classes they take.

Juniors take a required social studies course called Social Issues. It includes a trip to Washington, DC for two nights where students work with homeless populations. Kathy said students hear from current and former homeless people as to how they got there, what it’s like to live on the streets, and then they get hands-on practical experiences working with homeless folks in soup kitchens. Kathy’s comment was, “It is phenomenal!” Most of all, students apply peace and social justice actions in service to others. Kathy said, “It helps you learn it, and also see it -- then you get it.” According to Mr. Bower, these activities are a very strong part of not just the social studies curriculum, but of the graduation requirements at Dock.

In January senior students are allowed to job shadow and experiment with potential vocations or do a full-week service project somewhere while the underclassmen are in classes. The culmination of the whole community building curriculum is the senior presentation which takes place the week of graduation. Students make a 20-minute presentation to family, friends, and teachers -- anyone who wants to come and listen. They share their reflections on how they’ve grown academically, spiritually, with their lifestyle, and the graduate profile. It is tied to their senior communications course with an emphasis on speech-giving. Mr. Bower remembers the pressure he felt in giving this speech when he was a senior, but “I think it is beneficial not only for the moment, but also for years after that. I like the way we are intentional about teaching reflection. It’s also accountability to stand in front of your family, friends, and others in the community, and kind of own up to what you’ve done with the last four years.” Zach acknowledged that their community building curriculum “is a combined effort by all of us.”

Mr. Bower highlighted a curriculum committee each year made up of representative teachers and administrators that work together on the academic offerings. He said their good work is a reflection of the flexibility and trust “that we as teachers have to make pretty significant changes to our curriculum.”

Final Words

Kim commented that she and her husband have talked about the fact that it’s a [family] sacrifice for their children to be in a Christian school. She said, “But it’s not something that we take for granted that they’ll always be in a Christian setting. We will beg, borrow, but not steal to make sure that it’s our priority with both our kids! It’s a sacrifice, but it’s probably the biggest blessing that we have to see our kids go to [this] Christian school every day.”



In thinking about how their three children were influenced by a Christopher Dock education, parents Jay and Kathy referenced the Christopher Dock mission statement. Jay said, “I’m looking at the poster on the wall behind you. Dock makes radical followers of Christ. We wanted their education to be different, and I see the difference it’s made in their lives. Instead of thinking about themselves, they’re thinking, ‘What can I do to change the world?’”

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.

