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

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by Ginny Birky, PhD

Introduction to Research Project

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

About the research: For this post-doctoral research, I personally visited seven Mennonite high schools in the fall of 2014 to determine the strengths and distinctives of the school related to school atmosphere, academics, and faith development. I visited Western Mennonite High School on November 18, 2014 and interviewed 15 participants: five students, four teachers, a guidance counselor, three parents, an administrative assistant, and the 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 Western 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 Western Mennonite 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 Western Mennonite 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 Western Mennonite High School?

“Equipping students for a life of faith and learning”

Western Mennonite High School was founded in 1945 and was “established within a Christ-centered environment” and is “rooted in the Mennonite faith and Anabaptist beliefs” (WMS website). It is located in the Willamette Valley of Oregon between Salem and McMinnville. The 45-acre campus includes numerous buildings with classrooms, chapel, library, gymnasium, dormitories, cafeteria, and ball fields. The rural setting is graced with a large and open courtyard with a fountain, and is surrounded by wooded areas.

The high school at Western serves approximately 142 students in grades 9-12. The student body includes 30 international students, mainly from Asian countries. Students come from a wide variety of church denominations and faith backgrounds.

Western Mennonite High School is a part of Western Mennonite Schools, which now includes grades 6-12. Students in the system are supported by approximately 50 faculty, staff, counselors, coaches, and administrators.

Mission: The mission of WMS is to equip students for a life of faith and learning by providing an educational experience highlighted by five key distinctions: Christ-centered, academic excellence, nurturing community, peace and service, and enrichment opportunities.



*Paul Schultz
Head of School*



*Zig Derochowski
Principal*



Western Mennonite High School
9045 Wallace Rd. NW
Salem, Oregon 97304
Head of School: Paul Schultz
Principal: Zig Derochowski
<http://www.westernmennoniteschool.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 Western?

The most significant strengths of WMS as highlighted by the participants of this study were related to a *community of personal interaction and connections*, *customized learning*, and an *invitation to faith*. This report is organized around the description of these themes.

Community of personal interaction and connections

Jon's first words to describe Western Mennonite from the perspective of a student had to do with the general atmosphere around the school: *personal*. He elaborated to say, "This is a community of personal interaction and personal connections where we have the opportunity to be involved with each other -- that is a very big strength."

Parent Rachael, who had four Western children (two graduates and two currently in high school), observed how her children benefit from those personal interactions and connections. She said her junior daughter was very excited for school to start in the fall: "What better accolade could that give to the school—that a student can't wait for school to start? As a parent, it makes you feel wonderful." Wendy, parent of five Western students (one graduate, two in high school, and two in middle school), added that her boys had the same anticipation. She said, "There's something different about boys saying that. The feel of being here is so much more than just academics."

Mrs. Stinson felt called to this place of personal connections, Western Mennonite. She was in her tenth year as English and business teacher at Western and also served as lead teacher. Ten years ago her family moved from Canada so she could take a teaching position at Western, and now also having children who attend, her family is "deeply rooted in the school." She added, "I felt a sense of calling to come, and I always pray for direction that the call continues or if it's removed that I would see it clearly. So you know, that guides me a lot. I have no family within a thousand miles so between this and Western Mennonite Church, it's been a really great place to be with lots of support, not only spiritually, but also in practical ways too. It's the best group of students and parents you could ever be around."



Blessed to be in a small and caring community. Because of the personal connections, two moms praised WMS for being there for their children. Wendy said, "It's just an amazing place to be and our kids feel that. They know they are prayed for here and they know they are seen as individuals." Rachael added, "They can really blossom into young men and women in a really safe environment and learn without so many distractions. We feel blessed."

Both students and teachers attributed some of the strengths to the size of the school. Jon, a junior, believed part of the reason personal interactions were possible was because of the small size. He said, "We're close knit because we're a small school and you know people by their different facial expressions and their body language." Joanna, a sophomore student, said students know almost everyone and when they see each other in the hallway, they ask, "Hey, how's it going?" rather than just walk past each other all day."

Darlene, guidance counselor at Western for eight years, also recognized value in being a small school. “We’re small enough to be able to know all the students. I have just 200 in comparison to some [teachers in other schools] who have 500. It’s a huge benefit for me to know all of them and I love that.” Jodi was the parent of six Western students (two graduates, one currently in high school and three in middle school). She appreciated that the smaller size meant teacher-student ratios were lower. She commented that students respect their teachers for the role they play, but also see them as adult friends. She said the personal relationships they share mean “students are not just a number, but a person.”

Mrs. Helt had been at Western for 20 years as an English teacher and Academic Support Coordinator. Being both a parent and a teacher gave her a unique perspective from which to speak about the atmosphere at Western: “My son goes here and I know there are other good private schools around the area. But I know the people here and I know the conversations here. And I know that the overarching thing at this place is that teachers really do love the kids. So I want my kid to be loved and appreciated. He might get that other places, but I know he’ll get it here.”

Mrs. Helt said being small helps faculty and staff know the students and their families better and facilitates the development of relationships that lead to positive student actions. She said, “We can look for the strengths of a kid that might easily be overlooked, and we can help draw out their strengths. At the same time, we can hold them accountable. So love isn’t just praising somebody, but it’s also saying, ‘Hey, let’s raise the bar here with your behavior, your attitude, your effort.’ We can do that here. And that’s the complete picture of love that I wanted for my son and that I see the high school kids wanting. It’s tough love that is a part of the community, a relationship.”

Senior student Emily shared her perspective of what caring from a teacher was like at Western: “For me it looks like when you walk in the building in the morning and someone says, ‘Oh hey, how was your weekend?’ And you just start having a conversation like they were your friend. I mean it’s not the same because you know they’re not a peer but you know they know something about your personal life. For example, I show horses. So my teachers will ask me how my horse showing is going and they care.”

Mr. Woodard was in his 16th year of teaching social studies and assisting with athletics at Western. He said community is one of the things that drew him to Western. As a coach for another school, he noticed how grandparents and alumni still came to games and supported the school. He said, “Seeing that community really got my interest and then when we were looking, God just worked it out and I’m here. So for me the community and the faith are the biggest strengths here.”

Dora was the administrative assistant at Western, the person who answers the telephone, makes announcements, answers questions, and pays special attention to students. She’s been called “the face of Western” because of her role and longevity of 22 years at WMS as parents as well as employee. The first strength Dora identified in Western was a caring community because she also remembers being the recipient of care when her young family first moved to the area. She said, “As a parent, teachers cared for my children, they cared for me, and they cared for each other.” Dora said she mentioned community before faith because she believes community has a bearing on



education and on faith development. “There is a good education here, but I think it all comes back to that caring aspect. Because [teachers] care, they really want the kids to learn. Because they care, they are willing to share their faith and help others strive for that too. I don’t think you can separate it out.”

Mrs. Helt shared a similar sentiment from a different angle: “I think community works here. It is like a large family. We actively encourage the kids to be forgiving and accepting and kind. And because we’re a small school, that tends to work pretty well because we can work more easily and individually with a student. Kids need more training in those areas.”

Western’s principal, Zig, has been at the school for 13 years, first as teacher, then as assistant principal, and now as principal. He said staff and constituents consistently talk about the community aspect to prospective students and parents. After students attend for a while they sometimes say, “Now I know what you meant by a community that cares.” Darlene shared an example of a student that transferred from another school and went home after the first day and told her family, “It’s so different here. People actually care about you.” The next week she brought some of her friends to Visitor’s Day. Darlene said, “They come here and it’s a safe place. And there are icons here like Dora, for example. Where else are you going to have students come to the office and get a hug from the school secretary? She’s like an honorary momma! Some of our students just need a lot of love, and we give it to them.”

As did Mrs. Helt, Darlene and Chambers also compared the Western community to a family. Darlene said, “Maybe a lot of people use the word community and caring because it’s in our mission. But it’s kind of a cliché. To me it’s more like family.” Chambers was in his 11th year teaching math and coaching at Western. He explained his perspective: “It is definitely a community. But what I mean by that is that everybody feels part of a family. Everybody feels connected to Western, that it is part of their lives and part of who they are.”

Chambers further explained the comparison: “Families care about each other and whether or not you’re having a good day or a bad day. They are willing to help in times of need. They are invested in you. They will take you for your good and for your bad. If you’re depressed or something has gone wrong somewhere in your life, they will pick you up and will take care of you. They will be there with you along the way. And Western does that.” He shared an example from the same day when basketball teams for the year were posted. One student who had tried out for the team didn’t make it. Chambers said both he and other students immediately surrounded the student to encourage him and show they cared about his disappointment. Joanna affirmed that “caring happens between most students also, not just teachers.”

Zig explained how a student might feel recognized at Western: “[Staff] talk about the difference a smile or eye contact can make, that maybe we’re the only smile they get during the course of the day. We have no idea what their morning started like. Once they get here we identify them, we don’t let them blend in, and we don’t let them fall between the cracks. So we talk about them and share things in our faculty meetings. If we know someone is struggling, and we often do, we look for opportunities to connect with them and show we care.”

How do staff know when a student needs something extra? Jon said, “The teachers are very observant and that’s a big thing. They want to care. It’s not that they’re required to. It’s not that students are required to either but for the most part we just want to care.” From his own life, Jon shared that when he has a hard day or even a great day, “there is never a time where somebody is not interested in that. Not to the point where they’re getting involved in things that are not their business, but just a true concern or true interest in your life so you feel appreciated and acknowledged. It’s not nosy or annoying—it’s just caring. And it’s very inviting.” Jon went on to give a specific example of when teachers were “observant” from the previous week: “Speaking personally, I’ve just recently gone through some things. Emotions are not a switch to be turned on and off, so when you come to an environment like this, even if you’re not seeking attention, you still get people that are there for you. So for example I just had a hard day last Monday. I came here to school and the support was endless, not only from peers in my class but even from people that were younger than me.”



Connections. Parents sense community when they see or hear about the care and connections their child has received. For example, Jodi said she feels great when she goes to the office and sees her son’s picture with Dora. “Because it’s a smaller school, that kind of thing can happen a lot easier. This community is like a second home. We get to know faculty and staff here and feel confident in who they are as people. We get to know them on a professional level and also on a personal level. And a lot of them have children here so our kids are friends with each other.” Mrs. Helt had a similar thought when she said, “We’re part of the village raising [the students]. But it spreads out because you see parents at a ballgame and we’ll sit next to each other and just chat away. Pretty soon I have a new friend.”

Jodi said it was comforting to know the people her children were with and to know the community and atmosphere they were a part of at school. She believed the WMS environment was a safe one too. “I’m not worried that our son is out here after school hours waiting for basketball practice or [another event]. With right choices, it’s a very safe place to be. The kids look out for one another and other parents look out for other kids.” Trevor, a senior, said, “We have each other’s backs.”

Jodi wanted her children to be known. But she expressed that she also likes to be known, so appreciates when she can sit down at a parent-teacher conference and call the teacher by name and the teacher calls her by name. “A lot of times they’ll tell me personal stories of what my child has said in class or a prayer request that has been mentioned. If they follow up and want to know how it’s going, it’s great. I love that. And I love calling the school and hearing Dora’s voice, ‘Hey, Jodi, how’s your day going?’ That’s when I realize there’s still this small town community going on.”

For Mrs. Stinson, the word *collegiality* was a strength that described the connections. It meant connections with parents, other stakeholders, strong community support, and a great reputation in the community. She said, “It’s that whole connectedness with a lot of people who really have a common goal and truly enjoy being here and enjoy being at events that involve us all. Basketball and service events are big ones for me.”

Mrs. Stinson shared an example from the fall semester. She said Western did not have a drama director this year; consequently numerous adults were meeting a variety of needs so those students who wanted to act still had the opportunity. Mrs. Stinson was helping sew costumes, parents were bringing in dinner, and someone in the wood shop was helping with props. People were “pitching in to make it happen.” She said the same thing happens with the music program when many parents and staff volunteer to make sure students benefit from these experiences.

Diversity. Darlene said Western Mennonite School is “intentionally diverse” culturally, in socio-economic levels, and in beliefs. She thought there were over 25 Christian denominations represented, as well as some non-Christian students and those of another religion. According to Darlene, the strength at WMS is that students have a chance to “experience what life is like rather than being in a bubble and not knowing how to respond to someone with a different perspective on life than you have. I think that’s really valuable for the students.”

As a parent, Rachael was also pleased with the diversity at Western. She said, “One of the unique things about Western that we have come to love, and I think my girls have come to love, is the international presence here. It just brings a different flavor to the school.” Rachael said one of her daughters was intentionally bridging gaps and developing friendships through the International Club.



Darlene believed the dorms at Western were an “amazing opportunity to get to know people from all over the world.” Wendy shared a long-term benefit of students having classmates from around the world: “So now our kids that have graduated have friends from Indonesia. They Skype and do homework together. And now in college they’re getting homework help in Indonesia from their friend there – which never would have happened if Western had not fostered these relationships.” In addition to learning to know students from a different country of origin, Rachael believed her daughters benefitted from getting to know individuals whose experience with Christianity was diverse. She said, “Some are open to Christianity; others are actually very opposed to the gospel. But for me, it’s great to see my kids get a chance to rub shoulders with people who think differently but in a safe environment. I think that’s really cool.”

Extra-curricular activities. Students at Western have many opportunities to be involved in a variety of extra-curricular activities. Enrichment opportunities give students a chance to do things they don’t normally do, and to learn a new skill or new knowledge in the process. The list is endless—it could be to participate in sports or drama, keep the scorebook at a ballgame, adopt a road, do a service project, or numerous other options.

Some opportunities help students develop leadership skills. Trevor was President of the student body and Sophia was in her second year of being on Student Council. Sophia, a junior, said, “Western has given me a lot of opportunities to be involved. There is always a chance to do more and help others, but beyond that, I had the opportunity to go to Europe on Mini-term this past summer through Western. It was really awesome and life-changing for sure.” She described how her group from Western joined up with people from all over the US to visit France, Italy, and England. “So we got to see different cultures and types of people and how they live their lives, and it was just – I don’t even know how to describe it.”

Western Mennonite School has an active sports community. Mr. Woodard reduced all of what Western does around sports to this statement: “You know, we've done well in sports, but as a sports administrator, what means more to me is the testimony we have in the leagues, and we have a very strong testimony. Even though we do well, if we don't have our foundation in Jesus, then all this doesn't really matter.”



With the most important things in mind, as stated by Mr. Woodard, WMS does enjoy their involvement with sports. In fact, for some students it is at the top of their list of favorite things about Western. When asked the strengths of WMS, Trevor said (in this order), “The community feel, relationships with students and teachers, and basketball.” For students like Trevor, Western’s sports program is a big draw, and helps make them into well-rounded individuals. Trevor actually connected two things from his list – community and basketball. He said, “Everyone enjoys coming to events and they help create community.” He went on to say, “Parents have such a huge influence on the school. Outside people too. Everyone just puts so much time and love into our school.”

Mr. Woodard said, “Western travels well,” meaning many Western fans attend sporting events away from home, including to the state basketball tournament the last eight years in Pendleton five hours away. He said so many make the trip they call it a “Western Mennonite Convention.” But Mr. Woodard’s greatest thrill is the “phenomenal” behavior of the students. He said the managers and personnel at the hotel where they stay notice a difference between WMS students and some other teams and fans who stay there. He said, “They keep asking us back and working with us. I think it’s a result of the community we have.” Mr. Woodard concluded with this, “I love to win, don't get me wrong. We want the wins, but I wouldn't trade any of the victories for the strong reputation we have with officials.”



Not only did Western have a good reputation with officials, but with competing schools. He shared a story about a tournament game for which most would say resulted in some poor calls by the referee. Mr. Woodard said one of the school administrators came to him after the game and said in his 32 years of going to the state tournament, it was probably the worst-officiated game he had seen. Public school administrators told Mr. Woodard, “‘The way your people responded was remarkable. If that had been our school there would have been a riot.’ Yes, our boys had tears and things, but I think God had a plan. What's most important is that through our actions we're showing we know Jesus.”

Big Brother Big Sister Program. One additional strength related to the general atmosphere at Western should be highlighted: the *Big Brother Big Sister* program. It started when a WMS middle school student with a slight deformity was accepted and befriended by a high school student. Because of the positive impact on the middle school student, he started the Big Brother Big Sister program when he became a freshman because he remembered the anxieties middle school kids experienced and wanted to “touch their lives to let them know they were okay.” Darlene is the group’s sponsor and said that over 90% of the students have chosen to be involved in the program this year.

Zig described the program. Each high school class works with a corresponding same-gender middle school grade. So the junior boys are with eighth grade boys and the junior girls are with eighth grade girls. Sophomores are with seventh graders and freshmen with sixth graders. Zig said a variety of events for the siblings are organized throughout the course of the year. For example, the pairs might sit together in chapel at the beginning of the year or have a double lunch with one gender eating and the other doing an activity (i.e., games, art project, scavenger hunt). Zig said, “It helps build that nurturing community where we’re all helping each other.”

WMS has taken the Big Brother Big Sister program a step further. Zig said, “Now our middle school kids go to [a local Christian school] and we’re big brothers and big sisters to third through fifth grade there.” He said there were plans for the middle school big siblings to pick up their younger siblings on a bus and escort them to an Oregon State girls’ basketball game.

The Big Brother Big Sister program creates relationships that extend even after students graduate. Darlene said the previous year for graduation some college students came back to watch their younger “little brothers” or “little sisters” graduate from high school. So the connection and care potentially continues beyond high school.

As highlighted in the previous pages, most people talked about the social and emotional atmosphere at Western, and Sophia did too. But she also highlighted the physical space. “Our campus is beautiful,” she said. “I love that about Western. We can be outside, we get to walk around, and for science we’ve done nature walks since there’s so much land and nature to look at. In winter the pond is frozen and in the summer there are frogs out there. Yeah, I love our campus.”



Customized learning

Western Mennonite High School strives for academic excellence that meets the needs of students at Western for “customized learning.” Zig said they are intentional about creating a culture of continuous improvement; they survey former students to find out how they do after high school and also about their high school experiences, listening for what Western did well and what could be improved.

Darlene said there is a huge difference in the way students learn and what they need at Western. She praised teachers for doing so much differentiated instruction within their classes. While some students need to be challenged academically, others need additional learning support to meet the requirements. So structures are in place to accomplish both -- challenge learning and support learning.

Learning that challenges. Chambers summarized what he repeatedly hears from students about their academic work at Western. Students say teachers care about them, they are held to a high standard, and they have to work to get *A* or *B* grades. But they also say teachers give individual help when needed, encourage them to do well, and give them many opportunities to succeed. Chambers believed teachers’ expectations were high. He said, “We ask kids to perform

to a level that would be realistic in the real world, the kind of work their boss would want them to do. In other words if we ask them to do something and it's due tomorrow or the next day, well, it's due tomorrow or the next day after that.”

Mrs. Helt appreciated the freedom to choose a curriculum to fit Western students and teachers. She said, “We look at what public schools are doing, evaluate it in light of our goals here, take what we think fits well, and justify our choices. Our goal is to be as good as or better than the public schools. We do not water down our curriculum.” Mrs. Stinson put it another way: “Just because we're private doesn't mean there's an attitude that we don't have to do what our public school colleagues have to do. We want to be accredited and at least be at the state standard and hopefully above. So our students practice the PSAT from freshman year right through junior year which is great for the kids because it focuses them on their academic needs for the future.” Zig added that for the most part, Western's curriculum was in alignment with Oregon's academic standards. However, staff welcomed the freedom to be flexible in order to meet local needs.

The advantages of *small* were also cited in relation to academic quality. Numerous students, teachers, and parents said small class sizes allowed for more engagement between teachers and students, prevented students from getting lost, and facilitated more immediate intervention when there was a need for encouragement and/or additional support.



Speaking from the perspective of a parent, Mrs. Helt said one of her sons was “very bright,” yet he always felt challenged in his classes at Western. She said “countless graduates call or e-mail us afterwards and tell us they were prepared for college writing and for knowing how to do MLA formatting.”

There were several reasons Mrs. Helt's son felt challenged in his academic work. One was because teachers encouraged individual projects of special interest to students, so her son was able to “create some of his own learning.” But a major reason was because of the opportunity he had to take college-level courses such as calculus, AP courses, and honors classes. Mrs. Helt said, “He had choices and chose the challenging route.”

Joanna shared a student's perspective, “I think we're good at preparing students for college or whatever they want to do next.”

This year WMS introduced seven AP classes to respond to parent's requests and enhance the opportunities students had to take higher-level courses. While designing new curriculum is important, it is a significant amount of work for teachers. For example, last summer Mrs. Stinson attended a “very helpful” week-long training in San Diego to assist with the transition to teaching AP language arts for the first time. “Going through a new curriculum makes it hard to gauge how you're doing as you prepare students to take this illusive test, and you don't exactly know where you're going to end up. So it's a big step but one that is necessary.” In addition to the organized training, Mrs. Stinson said she had support from a teacher at Bethany Christian High School she met at a conference last winter and “who shared everything with me.” Another teacher visited a local public high school to observe the AP Spanish teacher for her own professional development around teaching AP classes.

Zig said he was reminded of how much teachers like to be challenged too: “I was so impressed with how they stepped up and were eager to do this. It created excitement in our staff.” In addition to the organized trainings, Zig believed that adding AP classes had the additional benefit of bringing some courses or departments “up a notch in rigor.” For instance, Zig said because the biology teacher designed the AP biology curriculum, “she now knows better how to teach her other biology classes and align the whole biology curriculum. She sees the flow, and it’s been good for our school all the way around.”

Learning support. Western has a variety of ways to assist students who need additional services or even just encouragement. One significant resource is a teacher designated as the academic support coordinator. Mrs. Helt, who also has a reading endorsement, works with students, teachers, and parents when a student is struggling academically. She is the liaison with public schools for special education services. Mrs. Helt said, “If students don’t qualify for special services but we still feel they need accommodations, I write a plan for them and work with the teachers to see that their needs are being met.”

Jon was one of the students on an IEP. He shared that academics have always been hard for him because he is dyslexic, and he processes information differently. He said, “So Diana gives me more time on big tests and also on smaller things so I have less stress with assignments and homework. I have the opportunity to explain the situation to the teacher and that’s worked very well. I don’t know where I would be without that.”

Zig believes that when a student fails, it is also a reflection on the teacher not being able to find a way to make the student be successful. As a result, other teachers and staff also get involved. The guidance counselor works closely with the academic support coordinator because sometimes the educational difficulties are a result of emotional or medical challenges. So overlap occurs, which adds another layer of support. The librarian is qualified to meet the needs of students by helping them gather current information in the library resource center. Mr. Woodard teaches an individualized math class as a way to give individual help to high school students who need it but do not qualify for special education. It was a new role for him, but he has learned to enjoy teaching these students and trying to build their self-esteem along with more practical things related to life in general.

Of course, teachers are at the heart of both *learning that challenges* and *learning support*. Zig credits teachers with an excitement for their subject area and a call to ministry. He said when you get both of those components, you have a group of people who find this a great place to work because they see their job as a mission and a way to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Sophia believed the connection students have with their teachers goes beyond the typical student-teacher relationship. She said they are more like “spiritual mentors and that makes the academics so much easier. It’s easier to ask questions and know that they’ll help you with anything. But because they know us so well and what we’re capable of, they also challenge us and push us to be the best that we can be. They keep us accountable and help us go beyond what we think we can do. So academically I know Western is really strong.”



Other students also talked about how approachable teachers were. Emily said she liked the way students can “converse with teachers on a personal level. They’re your friends as well as your teachers. And because of that, I can talk to them when an assignment isn’t working for me. And they work with you on it.” Joanna articulated a similar thought: “Teachers really try to help you. They want you to do well. It’s not just, ‘Here, do this homework.’ They go out of their way to let you know you’re missing an assignment or something. It helps me do better.”

Wendy said when students know their teacher will help them, it reduces a lot of stress, which makes it easier to learn. She was thankful that most days teachers were available in their rooms after school. “To know that they want you to succeed and they will be there after school or get another high schooler to come help you, that’s really changed the feel of school.”

Jon described an image for how teachers work with students on an individual basis versus with a whole group. He said, “A lot of times I get a picture of a school environment where the students are on one side of a wall or boundary and the teachers are on another side, and they’re both doing their own thing. But here at Western, that’s not the case at all. I mean teachers are everywhere. They’re where you don’t want them to be sometimes! They’re where you absolutely need them to be and, most of all, they’re just there if you want them to be.” Jon went on to say that if a teacher sees he is struggling personally, then the teacher cares enough to cross that boundary. He added, “My hope and prayer would be that students at every school have that experience. I’m very fortunate to have it at Western.”

Jon added that the interaction across the proverbial “wall” he described did not only go in one direction. He said, “On the flip side, if a student has something to contribute to the class there is no wall either. A student is free to speak up too, with respect of course, because [she’s] the teacher.” Specifically related to style of teaching, Jon said when there is no interaction as he described, “we sit, we see, we do our work, and we leave. The teacher does their thing and we do ours, but it’s all separate. That doesn’t happen at Western.”

Students and teachers talked about style of teaching and relevancy of lessons. Jon said teachers were often more like facilitators, assigning students to present and lead discussions. “They direct knowledge and understanding, and I think it’s really healthy.” In his math, geometry, algebra, and physics classes, Chambers said he spends very little time in the textbook. “Everything is hands-on learning.” He said his current students in physics were learning about evaporation and condensation, so they were building miniature greenhouses that were to be no more than 2’ x 2’ in size. Students had done some research to determine the type and shape of greenhouse they wanted to build. Then when the greenhouses were completed, they tied the concepts back to the textbook related to evaporation and condensation again, as well as energy transfer. Another project had to do with building bridges out of balsa wood to see if they could withstand a specific amount of weight. In geometry, Chambers leads students in measuring some of the buildings and trees on campus just by using proportions. In addition, there are applicable problem-solving activities students perform, such as figuring how many tables of a certain size to put up in a cafeteria for a specified number of people, drawing a blueprint of their bedroom or house to scale, or dropping an egg from a high distance without breaking it. Chambers said he’s had many students walk into class the first day and tell him they



dislike math. He says to them, “My goal is not that you're going to walk out of here loving math, but that you walk out of here believing that it isn't as bad as you thought it would be, that you can see where you will use math in life, and that you have the confidence to do it.”

Staff found parents to be partners. Zig said, “I find whether it is discipline, academics, or whatever it is, if you involve parents, you get a reaction from their end. They care. We really do feel like we're partnering with parents.” From the parent side, Rachael said she tries to ask herself, “What can I do to best meet the needs of my kids at Western?” Power School, a web-based student information system, helps parents, teachers, and students have the same information to serve as a basis for collaborative work that benefits the student. Jodi said this system has allowed for greater communication between teachers and parents.

Not only is learning customized and intentional, but so is guidance for college and career. Darlene said, “We believe everyone has equal value and that everyone's gifts are important, so we are intentional about helping students figure out their strengths and their giftings.” As a result of her passion in career development, Darlene is a nationally certified counselor and has a master's degree in career development. She works with students to help them discover their strengths and their God-given abilities, and then to help them value themselves as God's unique creation. Based on their strengths, abilities, and interests, Darlene works with each



incoming high school student to determine their goals, which then helps them decide which kinds of courses to take: career and technical prep, regular honors college prep, or high honors college prep. She said their guidance system is “very customized” and driven by student aspirations rather than random course selections based on what's easy or sounds good.

Trevor highlighted a careers class he was taking that included career exploration. He said he was learning a lot about finances, service, personality types, and strengths. Four job shadow experiences were required; Trevor had just returned from shadowing a fish biologist. He joined others in putting on waders and taking nets into the stream to catch and count different species of fish. Other students had shadowed nurses, elementary teachers, and computer programmers. The final requirement for the job shadow was to write a paper on what they had learned.

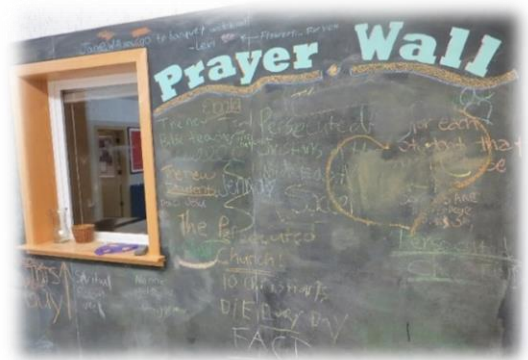
Teacher professional development. In order for teachers to stay connected with each other and improve their craft of teaching, cooperative teacher relationships were established. The idea was that teachers have partners with whom they determine teaching goals, maximize their classroom physical spaces, observe each other teach at least once a semester, and discuss these experiences together for the purpose of improving their own teaching. If necessary, a substitute teacher is hired to provide time to have this conversation.

Cooperative partners have intentionally wrestled with the topic of Christ-centered teaching: What does it mean to walk out our faith together? In one meeting, Zig asked teachers to share with their cooperative partner one goal of how they could bring Christ into their classroom in a new way. Teachers shared ideas and goals in small groups and then as a full faculty.

WMS has also made space at faculty meetings or in-service days for all 6-12 teachers to work on curriculum alignment together. Faculty from each department determine where they want to be by the end of each course they offer, and then figure out how they will get there. The decisions include such things as which textbooks to use, when students will write a research paper, major assignments, technology use, etc. These collaborations have enhanced curriculum quality at Western.

Invitation to faith

Faith development was a strong component of Western's strengths, experienced and expressed differently. Each individual had their own perspective of how WMS was a positive force in Christian education. But repeatedly, comments suggested an invitation to faith. For example, Darlene said, "Even though we're not overtly trying to convert anyone, we definitely want every student who comes here to get to know God and be able to make that choice." Dora said of the Christian educational environment: "Our strength is our overall faith in God. And I give it to Him. It's His place. He put it together. He's here and I just sense that people trust Him to bring us through. That's the icing on the cake!"



When Trevor said relationships with teachers was a strength at Western, he was referring to their "Christian values." He said, "All the teachers care about our lives and our studies. For example, our Bible teacher. He's the one that got me to read my Bible regularly, and have devotions every morning. He knows it's important in his life, so he wants that for all of us. It's something about the way he lives. He's just one teacher. But a lot of teachers here at Western have also been that way."

Jodi said, "As parents, we like Western for a couple big reasons. I think the No. 1 reason would be that it is Christ-centered—that our teachers and faculty are free to talk about Jesus in every subject and to reinforce values that we have at home." Wendy believed everything at Western was "pointed toward Him" and was pleased her children were "challenged to be who God wants them to be." She said, "I love that it's not just about coming and doing your little homework, but within the community together we can change the world."

According to Mrs. Stinson, faith-based education was the "number one strength." She described it as a "commitment to changing lives, introducing spiritual truths and support, discipleship, and an understanding of scriptures. We do that well through chapels, Bible classes, hiring the right faculty and staff, strong administrative support, taking the opportunity for prayer with colleagues, and taking away from academic time to focus on spiritual needs of students as they have the need." Mr. Woodard added that Western "is about Jesus first and foremost."

For Zig, it's all about the mission statement of "equipping students for a life of faith and learning." He added, "The number one distinctive is we're Christ-centered. So we tell every one of our staff and faculty that students should be able to tell by the way you behave and the things you do. Another distinctive is that we're a nurturing community, but you're not going to be a nurturing community if you're not Christ-centered. You can care a lot but [if you're not focused on Christ] you won't get into their lives and help students identify why they were created. It's for a bigger picture--you're unique--there's an awesome God that loves you."

Zig said those characteristics are what Western is known for and what they hear most often at graduation or from alumni. But these in combination with their other distinctives of peace and service round out the mission and help put it into action. For example, "when we combine peace



and Christ-centered, then you get good sportsmanship. We've had a lot of people comment that there's something different about us and it's nice to be able to say what that difference is. Twice this year we had a coach write a letter to complement our sports program for something one of our players did. A referee made a wrong call and one of our players corrected the call, and it hurt us. But they're just amazed because they never see that." The coach writing the letter said, "You guys surprised me once again."

From the perspective of a student, Jon affirmed the mission. He described the Western community as "faith-based and grounded where the foundation is built up on the Bible." He said students can be of any religion or no religion to go to Western. Jon gave a visual image to describe what Western's Christian influence was like for him: "It's like they put the cookies on the bottom shelf and they're there for you to take. They're not cramming the cookies down your throat because they believe that they're the best cookies ever, but they are putting them on the bottom shelf for you to see and experience, and then draw you closer and draw you in. And I think that is a great example of what faith in general should be."

Jon went on to say it wasn't always like this in his life. He said life in eighth and ninth grade was "really rocky and the cookies were not appealing to me because I was trying to do it on my own." But he credited Western for helping him grow and mature spiritually. He continued his analogy: "It was the crumb trail that stayed true. There were people walking [ahead of me] and dropping these little hints, these little crumbs, and I'm following behind. I just got the opportunity to pick them up, one by one. Teachers and also students were there -- it's just love. It's just showing the way and guiding while letting someone figure out their own faith. It's really an example of Christ's love and sacrifice."

Invitation through teachable structures and teachable moments. There are numerous ways students at Western are invited to faith. Some are through existing structures, such as chapel, small groups, and Bible courses (teachable structures). Other ways include more informal actions that integrate faith throughout the day (teachable moments).

Teachable structures. Bible classes provide both an overview of the Bible as well as in-depth examinations of Bible passages and doctrines, especially in freshman and sophomore years. Emily shared her perspective as a student currently studying the *Sermon on the Mount* in depth. She said, “I just love it. We’re going through every little section and I’ve never really done that before. The Sermon on the Mount was one of my favorite passages before, but just going through it [in this way] makes me realize how complex and deep it is. Just being able to talk with our whole class about what we think it means is really cool.”

Rachael believed that Bible classes were a good place for healthy dialogue related to issues of faith. Students may hear other perspectives than the one they grew up with, but Rachael said, “It’s good to learn how to think and not just like be told what to believe. I think it’s good when my kids come home and we can talk about other perspectives too.”

Junior and senior students take Bible courses that concentrate on application. Sophia was taking a Christian Life and Stewardship class that she thought was so applicable it should be required. She said, “I can apply it to my life a lot, like every day we learn something new we can take away from it and practice daily, so I really like that.” Trevor added how much he was learning in his senior Bible class, but said of the teacher, “His life is a powerful example for us.”



Critical to application is the desire for students to own their own faith. Chambers struggles with how to help students figure it out most effectively, but he said at least he’s been asking students the question of whether or not they believe something because their mom and dad believed it, or because they personally believe it. Do they really believe Jesus performed miracles? Do they really believe God loves them? Do they really believe in God? Chambers considered those questions to be most important to faith formation, and believed WMS did a good job of guiding students to take them seriously. A culminating assignment for seniors is to share their faith journey with others. Darlene said “they literally take apart everything they’ve ever heard or been taught, and then put it back together into their own statement of faith.”

Mrs. Stinson praised Bible teachers for making Bible classes relevant through hands-on activities. For example, she described a “Bible Literacy Garden” where students wore boots and went out to dig in the soil, making analogies to the *Parable of the Seed and Sower* in Matthew 13. They have also experienced a simulation of an underground church that involved a large number of community people and church denominations. Students had to secretly find their way to a barn at night and then defend their faith.

Chapels are held Tuesdays and Thursdays and include a variety of speakers who share about their lives or existing opportunities in which to be involved. One student especially appreciated chapel because she said her family members were not currently going to the same church, so sometimes she didn’t even want to go to church. But about Western’s chapels she said, “They have helped me so much because I’m constantly reminded of God and His grace and love for us. So I just love that even if I can’t go to church on Sundays I can be here at Western five days a week and still feel fulfilled, like God inside of me, and that’s awesome. It’s what I love about Western.”

Emily described how the chapel theme is chosen each year. Student Council, of which she was a member, has a retreat the week before schools starts. Together they decide on the theme, which this year was “From fear to freedom.” Emily referred to the chapel speaker’s comments from that very day; she said we are to be slaves to Christ, but in that we become free. Joanna commented that chapel helps her live out her faith.

Mr. Woodard, who was co-directing the chapel program, said by the end of the year they were hoping to have each teacher share in chapel. He said, “Kids love to hear sharing. They love to hear us share our story because then they know we're human.” Mr. Woodard shared with students about a family tragedy he experienced as a child. He said, “I don't know the exact reason God allowed that experience to be a part of my journey except that I would be able to share it and let kids know I can relate to their own terrible events in the past.” Mrs. Helt highlighted the times students lead out in chapel: “I don't know how to explain it, but it's really powerful.”

For Mrs. Helt, one of the most unique experiences students have is with small groups, which meet each Wednesday all year long and are generally same-gender groupings. She said every staff person on campus, not just teachers, has a small group of six to ten students. Chambers said groups share snacks, have a fellowship time, have some fun, talk about things, pray, and then study a Bible verse, this year from Proverbs. Students are usually open to share what they're going through. Darlene believed small groups were “all about the family thing we have here at Western.”

Chambers indicated that one of the things WMS faculty were striving for was to allow students to share their witness more often – “to have that faith be their own, and not only that, but be able to share it with somebody else and what it looks like.” Bible classes and chapel are two occasions when this can happen. As a parent, Wendy loved the fact that her children had opportunities to lead devotions and/or share their lives. She said, “There are chances for them to come up with their own story of however God is dealing with them at the time. All those practice times better equip them to have a normal conversation [about their faith]. They’ve been able to already put their story into words. They’ve had opportunities to reflect on what God has done and what their story is. It just kind of comes out more naturally for them.”

Teachable moments. Zig said, “We encourage teachers to take teachable moments and if there’s something going on, then run with it; don’t worry about the other part.” So while specific structures are effective, faith can be integrated into the day as teachable moments present themselves. Integration of faith happens many different ways: prayer first thing in the morning, devotions at the beginning of class, prayer before a test, posters on the wall, tied in with lesson content, and teacher-modeled. Chambers said, “We do all those types of things whenever we possibly can.”

Content area classes are a natural time to incorporate faith into the curriculum. Sophia hoped to get into the medical field to become either a nurse or a plastic surgeon. She said, “I love anatomy and the human body, and I think God created it in the most elaborate way possible. Right now I’m in AP Biology and just every little thing is crazy detailed. God’s just so great – even in that class we talk about how great God is.”

Opportunities to pray for individual students are frequent. Someone said, “If you want to see this, watch Dora. If someone is sick, she prays for them. If someone is discouraged, she prays for them.” Mrs. Stinson said she prays with her students in each class, but not everyone does. Her ninth graders tend to share prayer requests, so they pray mostly about what’s happening in student’s lives. Once when she had a discipline problem in her class, she shared it with a colleague and “we just joined in prayer for me right away. It’s certainly an open atmosphere where we are encouraged to do that.”

Service. Western sets aside a half day of service each fall when small groups work together on a project in the community. Mrs. Stinson credited these experiences with helping students become more aware of local needs. She said, “I have girls who have been shocked at the need for safe places for women and children in various situations. And so now they've taken ownership in doing something about it. Of their own initiative, two groups were collecting donated items for Christmas gifts. They feel ownership in the project and get excited about what they've been able to contribute, and I think it's really great.”



Another opportunity for service is during mini-term the last week of school in the spring. Some students said the service part of their trip was the best part, even though it entailed cleaning up a very dirty house or building in comparison to seeing tourist sights the rest of the time. Sophia said WMS has a Service Club that ministers to others in a variety of ways, such as with Union Gospel Mission or helping a local family with cleaning services. She said one of her Bible classes recently initiated a creative service project on campus, which “was a lot of fun too.”

Darlene credited service projects and mini-term with enhancing the sense of community at Western. She said, “You get to know people in a whole other way when you are doing a service project with them, when you're traveling with them, and when you're living with them.”

Final Quotes

Wendy: “We wouldn’t be here if it were not for the grace of God in financial assistance. Because Western meant something to the generation that came through already, they help us by giving back so our kids can come. I cannot wait to be the giving person and not the receiving person. That day will come, but right now we are so humbled that somebody else would allow this opportunity for our kids to grow in Christ. Seriously, if we did not see our kids thrive here, we wouldn’t be paying; we wouldn’t be doing this. And if we did not see God work in amazing ways here, we wouldn’t be driving this far.”

Sophia: “I wish I could stay at Western forever. Honestly, this is home to me.”

Trevor: “During my middle school years, I didn’t really want to go [to Western]. But being here has been the best four years of my life. Just the opportunities, the impact it’s had on my life, the friends I’ve made, the spiritual impact... I can’t imagine being anywhere but here. I will be different because of it.”

Dora: “The people that God brings here are the ones that are supposed to be here.”

Chambers: “I’m very blessed that one of my sons who went here as a student is now teaching here. It has come full circle. I now get to see him do what he received when he was a student, mentoring and doing stuff with kids, and that’s pretty cool. Now he can pass it on to other kids.”

Zig: “We stress that you can get a good education in a lot of places. Teachers care; the people care. But the difference here is that it’s going to be a Christ-centered education. That’s our ultimate priority, and so we’re not ashamed of it.”

Mr. Woodard: “I think we're spiritually strong and I look forward to seeing where God is going to take us.”

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.

