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## Assessing Spiritual Formation: Perceptions of Challenges and Successes

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## Assessing Spiritual Formation: Perceptions of Challenges and Successes

### Abstract

P-12 Christian schools are faced with the challenge of assessing spiritual formation. This research aims to understand the perceptions of spiritual formation assessment, describe the difficulties related to this form of evaluation, and make practical suggestions for next steps. Through survey and interview, we gained the perspective of individuals working in P-12 schools. Findings show that there are currently gaps and needs between: (1) mission and vision statements regarding spiritual formation and what is being practiced, (2) biblical integration both in content and in pedagogy, (3) godly relationships with students as an indispensable key in the formation of students spiritually, (4) some individuals educators not knowing how or reluctant to measure the heart, and (5) the desire for better assessment methods for this task. Practical steps towards a qualitative assessment of spiritual formation within individuals schools are offered.

### Keywords

Spiritual Formation, Qualitative Research

## Assessing Spiritual Formation: Perceptions of Challenges and Successes

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### Introduction

Embedded in the vision and mission statements of almost every Christian school are aspirational statements about spiritual formation. There is often an honest desire among educators for spiritual growth to occur through classes, the arts, athletics, and other co-curriculars. Unlike academic areas, however, our research demonstrates that such formation is often not regularly assessed effectively, and assessments generally focus on the student, rather than on the school. Relatedly, there are new re-accreditation requirements for some schools related to spiritual formation, so the need for plans and strategies that fit their school and mission have increased. Hunter and Olson (2018) recently conducted research on assessing formation in a variety of schools in the U.S., concluding that their research was an “initial effort” that “begs to be unpacked further” (p. 246). Our report is a summary and analysis of research with this primary question: What challenges and successes are Christian schools experiencing in the assessment of spiritual formation?

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*demonstrates that such formation is often not regularly assessed effectively, and assessments generally focus on the student, rather than on the school. Formation involves many different people, daily and hourly interactions in innumerable places, and the educator's own spiritual pedagogical growth and maturity.*

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Our working definition of spiritual formation describes a dynamic process within a student facilitated by a variety of situations and factors:

Spiritual formation is a biblically-guided process of growth and transformation that leads to more and more wholeness in Christ, a flourishing life guided by God's wisdom, resulting in service to others and His Kingdom because of God's grace. Spiritual formation is a personal journey manifested in love, and is most commonly experienced in and through relationships in community... Evidence of spiritual formation in a person's life is manifested in a variety of ways as the truth of Jesus flows more and more naturally ... in what she thinks, says, and does. (Drexler & Bagby, 2021, pp. 1-2)

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## Literature Review

Educators are essential for an effective spiritual formation program. In our research, spiritual formation is often linked with relationship-grounded discipleship through connections with teachers, coaches, and mentors, underscoring the reality that a student's spiritual growth happens in a variety of ways. Godly relationships are a key, but there are often profound differences between two types of educators: a teacher who is a Christian, and a Christian teacher. The latter is one who has learned to think, plan, choose, speak, critique, reflect, and interact in the classroom and in co-curriculars guided by a consistent and coherent biblical worldview. This is challenging work for an educator, a life-long endeavor involving personal growth in wisdom and truth. Without a consistent biblical framework for teaching and learning, the positive benefits of spiritual formation within students may be minimized.

The importance of godly relationships is a key finding of the focus group event from the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) at the Converge 2022 conference (ACSI, 2022). The educators who responded to three questions about how spiritual formation occurs noted, "Growing faith in students is marked by heart orientation, relationships, and spiritual disciplines" (ACSI, 2022, p. 3). In particular, an emphasis on "transparent", "authentic", "intentional", and "open" relationships with students was cited by participants. This is also a main theme of Hughes' (2022) argument for educators who exercise spiritual authority for the care of students' souls. If students are to grow spiritually, teachers also need to be growing in grace, wisdom, and understanding. Christian teachers set the biblical example in the classroom verbally, physically, and emotionally by what is said and done (and often by what is not said or done!), in countless ways. Zigarelli (2023) argued that discipleship does not happen in isolation, but within relationships. He proposed a disciple-making model using the work of Willard (1998), with a similar emphasis on mentoring.

Stronks and Blomberg (1993), Van Brummelen (2002), Smith (2018), and Graham (2023) advocated for Christian educators to be guided by the framework of scripture: the biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption that should inform and lead the work of teaching and learning. The

role of the teacher as a spiritual guide and example is a key to success, and that is often connected with the educational training that the teacher has received. Murphy (1995) argued, "No real teaching is done by those who do not constantly set a good example, that is, who order pupils to do what they do not do themselves" (p. 159), although this does not imply that Christian educators are without sin. Comenius (2020) advocated, "Students learn their teachers," urging "all teachers act as disciplers, living our lives in the view of students" (as cited in Beech, 2020, p. 67). A powerful aspect of that life lived before students includes acknowledgment of shortcomings with repentance. Relatedly, when teachers are not working well together relationally, students learn from that (e.g., what is "caught") more than what the teachers say (e.g., what is "taught"). Cardus initiated their Teacher Excellence Awards in 2016 with clear criteria: "A teacher must show evidence of increasing ability to articulate how Christian faith, rigorous scholarship, key skills (functional and innovative), and the formation of character all contribute to excellent teaching and learning" (Green & Sikkema, 2021, p. 13).

Jackson et al. (1993) and Jackson (2000, 2011) were early advocates for qualitative research in these areas, describing eight categories of teacher practice in the classroom, the most significant of which is what they call "expressive morality." Expressive morality emphasizes the reality that actions speak louder than words. A school can emphasize respect, for instance, but if students are treated disrespectfully, the words can fall on deaf ears. The trash problem around school can be talked about, but if rooms are messy, if study halls have trash and chairs strewn about, students hear the message loud and clear.

A recently developed tool is the Practicing Faith Survey (Practicing Faith, n.d.), developed by Cardus and the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching, available through the Center for the Advancement of Christian Education (CACE). The authors developed a quantitative instrument that asks for self-reporting from students (in grades 5-12) in order to determine the level of current Christian practice by individual students in five categories: intellectual, relational, introspective, beneficent, and formational. Other instruments that have been referred to by participants in our research include Faith Journey (Faith Journey,

n.d.), the Global Student Assessment and Flourishing Student Assessment (Wheaton Press, n.d.), and Lifeway’s Spiritual Growth Assessment (LifeWay Christian Resources, 2006), all of which

seek to measure individual student spiritual growth. Table 1 summarizes aspects of these instruments.

**Table 1**

*Assessment Instruments Identified in Data*

Assessment	Author	Quantitative or Qualitative?	Results on the student or on the school?	Key categories or practices	Includes the mission of individual schools?
Global Student Assessment; Flourishing Student Assessment (Faith Journey, n.d.)	Chris Browne	Quantitative: 27 questions (15 related to formation; 12 related to worldview); requires 10 minutes	Student profile generated based on the self-reported responses	Motivation Contentment Causes Outcomes Worldview Integration Formation Trust	No
Practicing Faith Survey (Wheaton Press, n.d.)	David Smith, Beth Green, and Albert Cheng	Quantitative: using a Likert scale of choices: “Never, Almost Never, Sometimes, Often, Most of the Time, Almost always”	Student assessment of an individual’s self-reported inclinations; taken twice in high school years	Intellectual Relational Introspective Beneficent Formational	No
Spiritual Growth Assessment (LifeWay Christian Resources, 2006)	Lifeway Christian Resources	Three Christians selected to complete a quantitative survey on the student; average the numeric results	Student reviews the results, then creates an action plan to address the 6 key categories	Abide in Christ, Live by God’s Word, Pray in Faith, Build godly Relationships, Witness to the World, Minister to Others	No

In addition, excellent work by the Cardus Education Survey (Cardus, n.d.), conducted periodically since 2011, provides generalizable statistics from graduates of government, non-religious independent, religious independent, and home school students which highlight school effects on students. Finally, the Good Soil surveys (Cardus Education Survey, 2020) began comparative research among the Association of Classical Christian Schools (ACCS) member schools in order to compare their outcomes with the Cardus research. All these statistics are general, in the sense that an individual school does not know how they compare with the outcomes in their particular category, but the research may help.

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## **Aims of the Study**

Initially, the purpose of our study was an attempt to better understand the measurement tools used by P-12 Christian schools for the assessment of spiritual formation. Research questions submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) asked (a) how schools answered parents and other stakeholders when asked how they were doing with the tasks of discipleship and spiritual growth through their education, (b) whether or not

schools were indeed assessing spiritual formation, and if so, what tools they were employing, and (c) if schools were not assessing spiritual formation, why not? After analyzing the survey and interview data, we heard the frustrations and uncertainties of our participants, which narrowed our focus. As a result, the research centered on this question: What challenges and successes are Christian schools experiencing in the assessment of spiritual formation?

## **Methods**

Qualitative research employs multiple methods and interpretive practices in an attempt to better understand the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In particular, our study selected survey and interview methods in order to hear directly from participants. Surveys allow opinions related to a specific topic to be gathered from a large group of people (Fraenkel et al., 2015). By contrast, "An interview yields data in quantity quickly. Immediate follow-up and clarification are possible. Combined with observation (looking, hearing, smelling, or touching), interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings that everyday activities hold for people" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 150). Therefore, we selected both survey and interview methods in order to gain a significant amount of data quickly, while also following up on what we learned from participants with additional questioning.

This study examined P-12 school personnel's perceptions of spiritual formation within their own Christian schools. Once IRB approval was received, survey (Google Form) and interview (Zoom) methods were employed, individual responses were elicited regarding current practices for forming students spiritually and difficulties experienced in the process of assessing spiritual formation were noted.

## **Sample**

In deriving a sample, we employed the survey to both gather data as well as to create a sample for the interview portion of the data collection. In order to gather data from a large sample of P-12 schools, we harnessed the education department database at our institution, with over 2000 schools with whom frequent contact is maintained for purposes of marketing and communicating with teachers and administrators. Our contact list does not differentiate the particular role the

individual plays in the school, therefore the information gathered was part of the survey (Survey Question 1). Our purposive sample provided access to educators working in schools likely to consider the assessment of spiritual formation as part of their ongoing school evaluation and could therefore inform the understanding of the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2015).

In total, 184 responses were received to the survey. The majority (63%) of respondents indicated their roles as either Head of School, Principal, or Administrator. Another 23% identified as Teacher, and the remaining participants self-identified in a variety of roles including Director of Spiritual Life, Academic Dean, Superintendent, Librarian, Director of Development, Consultant, School Counselor, Chaplain, and Director of Community Engagement. Forty-eight percent of survey respondents indicated their school was a covenantal school (e.g., at least one parent is a confessing Christian for admission) while 38% worked in an evangelical school (e.g., students are admitted regardless of faith commitments in the family). The remaining 14% represent a variety of self-identified alternatives including military, public, hybrid, and other combinations.

Participants were asked, "Does your school use phrases like 'God-centered', 'biblical', and/or 'integration of faith and learning' in your mission, vision, and/or purpose statements to describe educational outcomes related to spiritual formation for your students?" Ninety-three percent responded yes. When asked, "Does your school attempt to assess the spiritual formation of students?", 68% responded yes, while 32% answered no.

Next, a list was compiled of participants willing to take part in a follow-up interview (identified through the survey question: "Would you be willing to participate in a phone interview to provide additional information in regard to spiritual formation in Christian schools?). As part of the demographic information collected on the survey, participants were asked "What grade levels are included in your school? Check all that apply: Preschool, Elementary, Middle, High, or all of the above."

In order to ensure consistency in the interview process, the interview list was limited to individuals working in schools that included all grade levels from P-12. With this limitation, our list included 61 individuals available for an interview. Additionally, it was determined it would be best to only interview heads of school (due to their ultimate oversight of all school functions including spiritual life), rather than teachers or individuals in other roles. As a result, the list was further reduced to 47 individuals. The list was then divided into two groups, heads of evangelical schools (25 individuals) and heads of covenantal schools (22 individuals). Using a random number generator, 10 participants were selected from each category (heads of evangelical schools and heads of covenantal schools). The first five individuals from each category were contacted, requesting an interview. If no response was received after multiple attempts, the next individual on the list was contacted. After that, 10 participants were interviewed (five heads of evangelical schools and five heads of covenantal schools). Our random selection did not include any international schools. We thought it would be important to broaden the perspective to include participants from international schools, so we reviewed the survey results for administrators working in international schools based on the school name and/or area code provided. From this small number of participants, we chose two additional heads of schools to interview. In total, 12 interviews were conducted.

## Data Collection

Each survey participant received a Google Form which required approximately 15 minutes to complete. Survey questions included information pertaining to participants' specific roles within the school, characteristics of the school (covenantal or evangelical), and whether or not the school attempted to assess the spiritual formation of students. Additionally, open-ended questions gathered information regarding difficulties the school encountered while assessing the spiritual formation of students.

All interviews were conducted by both researchers, who had together created the interview questions. Interviews were semi-structured, with the interviewers asking open-ended questions allowing for significant responses from participants with follow-up questions from

the interviewers. Questions asked included how participants defined spiritual formation within Christian schooling, whether schools currently conduct any assessments of spiritual formation, and what resistance (from the Board, leadership, parents, others, budget restrictions) was experienced in regard to assessing spiritual formation. Heads of school were also asked if any additional aspects of assessing spiritual formation ought to be considered that had not been referenced in the interview. The average length of the interviews was 46 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Summary notes were compiled for quick reference.

**Coding and Analysis**

Through the coding and analysis process, our initial goal was to gain an understanding of the measurement tools used by Christian schools. However, this focus shifted through the analysis process. In addition to demographic information, survey responses provided data regarding how important the assessment of spiritual formation is to the school, and whether or not participants’ schools attempt an assessment of spiritual formation. In the open-ended portion of the survey, participants were asked to describe

the process for assessing spiritual formation and to identify any difficulties encountered in that assessment. Initial coding of the open-ended survey data was conducted by the researchers (the authors of this report) independently, by marking the text with colored coded tags and keywords. Categories were then shared, recategorized, and condensed to an agreed upon set by both researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process resulted in the identification of the following codes: parents, quantitative measures, relationships, lack of tools, honest responses/measuring the heart, and definition (of spiritual formation). The initial codes were also used to inform the development of interview questions, providing the opportunity to follow up on common items discovered in the survey data.

Once survey and interview data were compiled, initial codes served as the starting point for the identification of themes. Researchers relistened to interviews using the printed transcription for memoing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once again, new codes were identified individually and then compared and contrasted by the researchers. Table 2 shows an example of the early codes identified in survey and interview data.

**Table 2**

*Early Codes from Survey and Interview Data*

Code	Survey	Code	Interview
Relationships		Teachers/Mentors	
	Observation and mentorship.		They remember their relationship, and they remember maybe a defining moment.
	Teacher relationships with student		There really needs to be a strong push for discipleship.
	Assessing spiritual formation is done through discipleship and mentoring opportunities.		So our main tool is like how those teachers integrate biblical truth all day long.



Honest Responses/  
Measuring the Heart

Should/Can it be  
Measured

Honesty.

Spiritual formation is a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, it cannot and should not be measured.

Argument has always been; How do you know what is really in a student's heart?

How do you measure the human heart?

Reliability of student answers or statements

I don't want to be a judge of someone's faith.

Only God knows the heart

Are we producing Pharisees; how do you ask questions in a way that isn't?

This iterative process of examining and merging codes allowed for the triangulation of data, resulting in the identification of key themes common among all participants. As the researchers categorized the data, a shift in the research questions emerged. Rather than gaining an understanding of the measurement tools being employed, the researchers shifted the focus to describing the perceived challenges and successes heads of schools were experiencing with the assessment of spiritual formation. With this shift, categories were reconsidered and themes began to emerge. These themes were labeled by analyzing codes identified in both survey and interview data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

*Data collected through both survey and interview provided in-depth information regarding heads of schools' perception of the assessment of spiritual formation in a variety of P-12 school settings, and five major themes emerged: gap between mission and practice, biblical integration, relationship, "You can't measure the heart", and assessment methods.*

## Results

Data collected through both survey and interview provided in-depth information regarding heads of schools' perception of the assessment of spiritual formation in a variety of P-12 school settings, and five major themes emerged: gap between mission and practice, biblical integration, relationship, "You can't measure the heart", and assessment methods.

## Themes

### Gap Between Mission and Practice

A significant majority (93%) of survey participants and 100% of interview participants indicated their foundational documents include language related to the spiritual formation of students. However, both survey and interview participants found it difficult to adequately define how spiritual formation should be assessed and whether or not the assessment of spiritual formation ought to be a regular part of the life of a

school. The majority of the participants affirmed that the mission and vision statements of their schools indicate the development of spiritual formation as a high priority, however, many also recognized that measurement of indicators was difficult. As interview Participant 2, head of an evangelical school, stated, "I would also say that everybody in Christian education would say that it is their heartbeat. But then, you know, from the words to the practice. It's not an easy thing." The head of a covenantal school recognized the difficulty saying:

I had to be honest with myself and say, "We know that we developed a program of academic excellence because it's very easy to measure. But how do we know that we've developed a program that addresses the Christ-like characteristics of students?" It's not as easy to measure. (Interview Participant 3)

Interview Participant 11 (head of an international school) expressed it this way: "The topic is so important. I mean, so many of our school goals are spiritual formation type goals. But figuring out how that works, and how to assess it ...." Similarly, the head of a covenantal school, said:

That's where I think the gap lies. I'll be frank, you know, our best intentions don't meet our practice ... but to be plain, it's largely observational at the moment.... I suppose it would be a priority that gets sacrificed on the altar of what's urgent. (Interview Participant 6)

Some participants even questioned whether or not schools ought to assess spiritual formation. Survey Participant 159, head of a P-12 school, stated, "Many of our teachers think they are not in a position to 'judge' another person's spiritual development. We are uncertain how best to do this." Similarly, interview Participant 3, head of a covenantal school, explained it this way:

We've talked about this a lot at the school and spiritual formation, the assessment of it, is very complicated and some could even argue that since spiritual formation is the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, it cannot, and it should not, be measured.

Though the majority of survey participants and all of the interview participants indicated their schools attempted to assess spiritual formation, there was a significant discrepancy between intention and action and there were also varying levels of success in assessing spiritual formation. While some participants questioned whether or not the school ought to be assessing spiritual formation, most agreed that it was an important component of the life of a school. Many expressed concerns about being ill-prepared for the task.

### **Biblical Integration**

Eighty-three percent of interview participants recognized that the spiritual formation of P-12 students includes both content integration with scripture as well as classroom behaviors and procedures. In other words, biblical truth can be integrated into the teaching of science, math, and history, but biblical principles should also be woven into school rules, classroom management, discipline plans and strategies, relationships, instructional strategies, and other school functions. Additionally, educators in a school pursue this not only in their teaching and practice, but also, by God's grace, in their personal behaviors and attitudes as they model correct conduct and manners. In short, biblical integration is a comprehensive concept in life and work, and in teaching and learning.

When asked to describe the procedure for assessing spiritual formation, multiple survey participants described lesson planning, assignments, and assessments that include biblical integration. In addition, 67% of interview participants mentioned biblical integration as important for spiritual formation. Interview Participant 12, head of an international school, identified his strategy for helping teachers understand biblical integration:

So, the line we use with our teachers all the time is, you are never looking for how the Bible fits into your class. You're looking at how your class fits into the Bible. The Bible came first, the narrative is bigger. So find out where your math class fits into that. Which part of the creation, fall, redemption, restoration narrative does your class fall into and how can you impart that to your kids?

Similarly, interview Participant 10, head of an evangelical school, explained how he views biblical integration:

I think what has happened in Christian schooling is that teachers think that spiritual life is an extra component on top of what they do as an educator. And what I'm trying to help them to see is "No, actually your main role is to educate your students, not in just one content area, but in the content of life and eternity."

Another participant also recognized the importance of classroom practices that point to biblical truth:

What else are you communicating in almost an unspoken way in how you ask kids to participate? How do you start a class? How do you end the class? How do you engage in questioning? How do you encourage dialogue or protocols between students in a think-pair-share activity or what have you? How are we communicating deep Christian truths through those classroom practices that is so often lost, right? How do we do that through classroom management, with discipline? (Interview Participant 12, head of an international school)

Providing a helpful example of biblical integration, interview Participant 7 described this:

Right now I do teach a math class and we're in the middle of graphing inequalities, which I always tell kids that graphing is like the absolute perfect illustration for the infinity of God because we can't humanly grasp that... as our superintendent is fond of saying, "If you tee it up please hit the ball." (Head of a covenantal school)

The majority of interview participants indicated that the integration of faith and learning is important in Christian schooling. The respondents in our interviews talked about both an integration of biblical truth with academic content areas and weaving together biblical principles of behavior and virtue into pedagogical practices. Administrators can hire teachers who have been trained to think and act consistently in biblical

categories, and there is also the need to provide ongoing professional development that strengthens that training. Without that depth of understanding and heart orientation (see the theme "You Can't Measure the Heart" below), it is hard to imagine how effective a teacher will be in promoting spiritual formation in the classroom.

### **Relationship and Mentorship**

Two-thirds of the interview participants discussed the role good teachers play in the process of spiritual formation and discipleship, and the preceding theme of biblical integration was a strong component. Interview Participant 5, head of a covenantal school, stated: "Teachers are number one because you can talk about gentleness or any virtue all day long, but unless they see it lived out in front of them, it will become just those clanging cymbals." Later, this interviewee offered a helpful analogy to further this concept:

So, the spiritual formation comes out, or shows, in we hope everything, too. But we, you can't assume that it's going to happen without being purposeful and in planting those seeds and then watering those seeds and, you know, giving them the proper amount of sunlight because, really, this is something else that it's interesting to think about, that too much sunlight can burn a plant...When you get your hands dirty, down in there and tilling the hard soil and, so, all of that is spiritual formation. (Interview Participant 5, head of a covenantal school)

Survey Participant 160, an administrator at a P-12 school also emphasized this, describing the procedure for assessing spiritual formation as, "through interaction with students and creating circumstances for them to put their faith in action." Survey Participant 13, head of a P-12 school, said, "The truest measures of spiritual formation happen in the context of relationships and require significant investments of time and energy." Another response confirmed, "Assessing spiritual formation is done through discipleship and mentoring opportunities" (Survey Participant 173, head of P-12 school). Interview Participant 9, head of an evangelical school, expressed a similar idea:

I think we have to move from an academic model of Bible curriculum to an application model of Bible curriculum...Let's look at that and let's take the Bible stories and lessons and see how they apply to our lives, and so I think a lot of it starts with application in your Bible curriculum, which means you go out there and get somebody that is a relational teacher and a relational learner, and can really relate to kids.

While recognizing the need for mentoring from teachers, participants also recognized the difficulty of hiring teachers who are excellent in both their content area and at building relationships with students. Interview Participant 10, head of an evangelical school, stated, "I think that there really needs to be a strong push for discipleship. I think that's the most important aspect to where spiritual formation comes from we see modeled with Jesus." Interview Participant 12, head of a covenantal school, also recognized this element:

I'm very, very grateful that my teachers have discipleship hearts for the, for the most part. And so, the question was not so much how can I get out of this? But the question was, how can I do this most effectively, while I'm also doing X, Y, Z, and 70 other things. And so we tried to work with teachers to lower some burdens and other areas to free them up, to have that time to do that. But also, we have some teachers who simply themselves don't have the foundational knowledge of these disciplines of foundational knowledge in terms of what it takes to disciple a young believer or a non-Christian and plant that seed. Maybe they went to a secular university. This is their first Christian education job. Maybe they're just young and immature in the faith themselves, and so they don't have the theological grounding and so on. So, we're actually redeveloping our - this is a bigger answer than to the question you asked us - we're redeveloping our understanding of Christian education program to train teachers.

The perspectives expressed above are encouraging on the one hand, but challenging in

other ways. School leaders recognize the importance of nurturing relationships with students, but also acknowledge that finding those Christian educators who are willing and able to do the work is a challenge. The interviews indicated that teachers on the whole are qualified in terms of their content areas, but many note that it is challenging to find teachers who have studied and prepared to be a Christian teacher.

### **"You Can't Measure the Heart"**

Unlike the assessment of content knowledge, the assessment of spiritual formation presents some unique challenges. When asked to describe the difficulties schools encountered when assessing the spiritual formation of students, participants identified the difficult task of assessing a category such as spiritual formation that does not necessarily provide measurable data. As survey Participant 36, head of an evangelical school, succinctly stated, "We are not the Holy Spirit. We can only assess spiritual fruit, and even then, we are limited in our abilities to do so." Survey Participant 77, head of a preschool/elementary evangelical school, reported:

Spiritual formation is fluid, personal, and cannot be put in a box. We can observe and assess outward professions, actions, memorization, the fruit of a life, etc. but true spiritual formation happens at a heart level and only God truly knows the heart.

Survey Participant 61, head of a K-12 school, stated, "Well, we can't always see what is happening in students' hearts. We don't want to just judge outward appearances or rely on survey answers. Sometimes what they say and how they act doesn't really match up."

Similarly, 67% of survey participants also indicated that measuring the heart proved to be challenging. As one participant confessed:

I went to Christian education pre-K through 12. When I was a senior in high school, if I would have been given a spiritual formation assessment, I would have known, I would have been able to

smell the “right” answers and I would have given them, whether I agreed with them or not just because I would have wanted to please. (Interview Participant 3, head of a covenantal school)

Similarly, survey Participant 96, a high school administrator said:

It is so personal for each student, and our “most spiritual” student may not have actually grown at all, while our “less spiritual” student may have had tremendous growth for the year in order to go from say agnostic to “searcher”--yet the first student is the only one we would point to as “success story.”

Additionally, the concern arose that many students would be able to provide the “Sunday School answer,” but that would not necessarily represent their true spiritual formation. Interview Participant 11, head of an international school, recognized this difficulty and asked, “Even if a kid isn’t a Christian, could they actually explain a Christian worldview?” Interview Participant 10, head of an evangelical school, said:

Are we producing Pharisees, and how do you ask questions in a way that isn’t. There’s the right answer, the Christian answer, and then there’s the wrong answer, you know. How do you get a true, authentic response from a generation that really values honesty, and doesn’t want to be fit into one little box?

Interview Participant 12, head of an international school, spoke of a current student:

Our top Bible student right now in grade 10, for example, she’s an atheist, a staunch atheist, and she will fight tooth and nail on every point, and yet she’s 99% in the Biblical Studies class, she participates fully in chapel and so on, because she enjoys it.

Participants noted the difficult task of appraising spiritual formation and the need for evaluation tools that are effective for this specific challenge. This perceived difficulty becomes even more acute

if educators begin to think they are measuring or grading the hearts of students.

## Assessment Methods

In discussing the difficulty of measuring spiritual formation (Survey Question 9), survey participants identified the complication of finding the right tools to accomplish the task. A few participants indicated they had yet to find adequate instruments, as survey Participant 109, an administrator at a K-12 school indicated, “We have not found a good tool for assessing spiritual formation and would love to have one.” While some schools employed a variety of instruments, both quantitative and qualitative, most participants remained dissatisfied with the measurement devices that are currently available. Part of the complication in identifying an effective tool has to do with the attempt to measure something that is not readily observable. When asked about the difficulties in assessing spiritual formation, survey Participant 45, head of school at a covenantal K-12 school, said, “We attempt to give a numerical score to just biblical knowledge. We discover that students might know the correct answers yet do not live out these in practical, day-to-day life.” Similarly, survey Participant 65, a teacher in a P-12 covenantal school, stated, “Students can easily give ‘right’ answers to look good or ‘wrong’ answers to sabotage, it gives the impression that spiritual formation is just more boxes to check”. Another survey participant, who did not self-identify their school role, working at a P-12 covenantal school, put it this way: “How to do it without seeming like we just care about numbers.”

When asked to describe the procedure for assessing spiritual formation at their school, survey Participant 33, head of school at a P-12 evangelical school, said,

We have not found anything that provides good data points. We would love something, though, if this is where this research is leading. We use anecdotal as stated above (spiritual retreats, revivals, meetings with Bible teachers, etc.). We need something better.

Along the same lines, interview Participant 5, head of a covenantal school said, “We don’t have a

way of assessing their spiritual formation in hard data.”

Another aspect of this theme deals with questions regarding the systematic collection and analysis of data as well as the appropriate methodology to employ for this task. When asked about the difficulties schools encounter when assessing spiritual formation, survey Participant 94, an administrator at a P-12 evangelical school, noted, “Discovering or developing an effective and well-vetted tool for the purpose” is a challenge. Survey Participant 140, head of a covenantal school, said, “Finding a reliable tool that will provide valid feedback”. Survey Participant 151, school counselor at a P-12 covenantal school stated, “The greatest challenge seems to me to be that there is no comprehensive or agreed upon plan for the best way to measure something that is so subjective in nature.” Interview Participant 4, head of an evangelical school, stated:

One of the things is just even being able to collect data in any kind of organized or systematic way, you know, we have so many students, you know, what questions do we need to ask? So just even some sort of systematic way of even knowing that and collecting that organizing it and then being able to kind of sift through and analyze it, that’s a roadblock and an obstacle that we do face.

Additionally, participants indicated the time involved in the process was also prohibitive, as a participant noted, “One of the difficulties is it takes a long time, and schools are usually looking for quick fixes” (Interview Participant 3, head of covenantal school).

Interview participants were asked which kind of research (quantitative, qualitative, or a combination) they considered best to assess spiritual formation in their school. Survey Participant 44, head of a P-12 covenantal school, responded, “Qualitative assessment seems most authentic and relevant, but quantitative assessment seems artificial to impossible.” Survey Participant 148, head of a K-12 evangelical school, said,

There are problems with making such things as this quantitative and other problems with making them qualitative.

Covering topics is a pretty weak way to assess spiritual development. Ultimately, we believe longitudinal study is the best way to assess effectiveness in this area.

Interview Participant 12, head of an international school, indicated, “What we found was they [quantitative assessment tools] didn’t dig into the issues that we wanted to focus on. They didn’t know our kids the way we knew our kids. They were too universal and there was no customization available.”

While multiple survey participants indicated their schools are employing quantitative measures for gathering spiritual formation data, many recognized the inherent difficulties with the methodology. When asked about the relevance of qualitative methods, multiple interview participants recognized the ways in which this methodology was sensitive to the difficulty of measuring spiritual formation and therefore preferred its strategies. However, there also tended to be a hesitancy to employ qualitative measures, due to unfamiliarity with its processes, or with the perceived time and effort involved.

## Conclusions

The majority of participants recognized the need for the assessment of spiritual formation, both from the official documents governing their institutions, as well as accountability to accrediting agencies. However, most admitted that while they were competent at assessing content-related items, their schools struggled to assess spiritual formation in authentic ways, leaving gaps between their stated mission and practice.

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Participants identified biblical integration in both content areas and in classroom practices to be vital for forming students spiritually. Additionally, some indicated the need for further training of teachers in order to ensure competence in this area. Similarly, participants recognized the role a good teacher plays in the process of mentoring students toward being formed spiritually. Some participants even indicated they would trade teachers who were excellent at teaching content for those who excelled at developing discipling relationships with students.

Jackson et al. (1993) and Jackson (2000, 2011) were early advocates of moral practice in the classroom, the most significant of which is what they call “expressive morality:”

... Emerson framed the idea memorably when he said, “We pass for what we are. Character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment.” ... This implies that almost everything a teacher says and does, including the way she stands about when doing nothing, can potentially reveal something that will heighten or diminish an observer’s impression of her trustworthiness ... Or picture the high school teacher who stands by his classroom door at the beginning of each period, ushers in the near latecomers, closes the door promptly at the sound of the bell, and then immediately strides to the center of the room, calling for attention as he launches into the day’s lesson.... The abruptness of the teacher’s movements conveys a sense of the importance of what is about to take place in that room.... They say that here is a teacher who cares about what he is doing. Here is someone who doesn’t have a moment to lose. (Jackson et al., 1993, pp. 30, 34, 36-37)

Our research supports the importance of healthy relationships, mentoring, and “expressive morality” as Jackson et al. (1993) observed in their two-year qualitative research involving 18 classrooms in public, private, and parochial schools.

Regarding the necessity of assessing spiritual formation, many participants expressed concern at being asked to evaluate students’ hearts, and therefore, shied away from attempts at quantitative assessments for this reason. Some participants even indicated that the assessment of spiritual formation was an inappropriate role for the school to take on, and ought to be left to the church. However, most participants desired to find authentic ways to assess spiritual formation that were more holistic than assigning a numerical score to an individual student. As a result, many discussed their dissatisfaction with quantitative measures and their desire to find qualitative methods that might be better suited for the task and connected to the mission and purpose of their school. Quantitative tools, our research demonstrates, tend to “measure the heart” of students, and our survey and interviews revealed some reluctance in pursuing that.

In our previous essay (Drexler & Bagby, 2021), we outlined five methodology steps for establishing a qualitative assessment of an individual school that measures success in terms of the school’s programs directed towards spiritual formation. In summary, the steps we advocate are: (a) clarifying the school’s mission, purpose, and philosophy statements, the documents in which the words and phrases related to spiritual formation are found; this is a crucial first step in the process, and these documents should be reviewed regularly and updated as needed; (b) assigning responsibility to one or more people with the requisite skills to conduct regular qualitative research for the school, and this is a task that likely should not be added to the work of the principal or head of school; (c) choosing the appropriate phrases from those foundational documents which point to spiritual formation, then formulating interview questions; (d) interviewing randomly selected recent graduates (one year out or less) using the questions in a semi-structured format which allows for exploration and disaggregation of non-school influences; we recommend interviewing graduates at least every other year; and (e)

making good use of the rich data gained to inform colleagues and determine collaboratively what changes and improvements are needed. We are not advocating “grading” students’ hearts spiritually. Instead, we recommend qualitative research to guide individual schools in assessing their own programs and initiatives aimed at spiritual formation.

As one example of the usefulness of these five steps to guide programmatic change, one of our interviews was with the principal of an international school who told us they had recently used qualitative research to assess their chapel program’s effectiveness in light of their mission. His conclusions are enlightening since many might assume that chapels in a Christian school are linked positively to spiritual formation:

We did a big change this year in terms of how we structure chapel [based on data] ... we do two large group chapels a month now, and we’ve changed the tone of those chapels. They’re much less church service-like and much more conversational and engaging ... and the other two weeks are in small groups so they meet in classrooms ... one of those times is just guys and just girls and the other time is the homeroom class together ... and the focus is on the spiritual disciplines. (Interview Participant 12, head of an international school)

The emphasis of our research is on assessing whether or not a school’s programs, practices, and structures are facilitating spiritual formation. The heart of the matter is indeed the matter of the heart, not in assessing student spirituality, but rather in determining, for example, if a school’s chapel program is helping or hurting. If one-on-one relationships between a Christian educator and a student are an important link, then the structure of chapel itself may create a separation in that immediate relationship, especially when outside speakers are common. The focus of a qualitative assessment of spiritual formation, then, is centered on the evaluation of programs and structures for a particular school, and not assessing individual students. The data gained through this process can help a school determine whether or not its programs, structures, and priorities are facilitating the spiritual formation

that its mission and purpose statements articulate. Assessing the strategies a school has in place to help students grow spiritually is a profitable commitment for school growth.

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*The authors of this study hope to continue the collaboration related to qualitative assessments of spiritual formation with interested educational leaders and schools. Assessing spiritual formation qualitatively in light of the stated mission and purpose statements of an individual school provides meaningful data that either confirms or contradicts the stated goals of that Christian school.*

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This study employed survey and individual interviews in order to investigate the perceptions of P-12 Christian school employees regarding the assessment of spiritual formation in their schools. This study provides important new evidence regarding the thinking of P-12 Christian school employees, but has some limitations. While surveys were open to all school employees, the interviews were limited to heads of schools. It is also possible that the participants willing to be interviewed for this study were those who already took an interest in the assessment of spiritual formation within their schools, thereby potentially biasing the results. Further research might offer the opportunity to gain additional perspective from those working in other roles within Christian schools. In addition, the study was conducted with a relatively small purposive sample. However, the findings add to the current literature since there is little published regarding the nature of spiritual formation assessment from the perspective of those working in schools. Other future research might attempt to grapple with the confusion between spiritual and moral formation.

The authors of this study hope to continue the collaboration related to qualitative assessments of spiritual formation with interested educational leaders and schools. Assessing spiritual formation qualitatively in light of the stated mission and



purpose statements of an individual school provides meaningful data that either confirms or contradicts the stated goals of that Christian school.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Questions

1. When you received the email from us about this research, why did you respond to the survey? What is your interest in this topic?
2. What is your definition of spiritual formation within Christian schooling? In other words, if you and your school are going to assess spiritual formation, what will you be assessing?
3. In our survey results, some respondents expressed concerns about the authenticity of how students might respond to questions about their spiritual formation. Do you share those concerns? Why or why not?
4. What other reservations or uncertainties do you have regarding the assessment of spiritual formation?
5. Is your school currently conducting any assessments of spiritual formation? If so, please describe what is being done, with whom, by whom, and how often. Also (if the person responds positively to this question), what have some of the results of your assessment shown?
6. Which kind of research do you think will best assess spiritual formation in your school: quantitative, qualitative, or perhaps a combination of those two?
7. Is assessing spiritual formation as important for the Christian school as say academic assessments? Why or why not?
8. Have you or your school tried to assess spiritual formation in the past, but the end results weren't helpful? If so, please describe those attempts for us.
9. What resistance (from the Board, leadership, parents, others) have you experienced in regards to assessing spiritual formation?
10. Are the cost and time commitments to pursue spiritual formation assessments a deterrent for you and your school?