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## Book Review: Education for Hope: A Course Correction

Sean Schat  
sschat@redeemer.ca

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## Book Review: Education for Hope: A Course Correction

### Abstract

A review of Hull, J. E. (2023). Education for hope: A course correction. Friesenpress. (ISBN: 978-1-03-914533-7, 431 pages, soft cover)

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Sean Schat, Redeemer University

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This is an important book. But it is a tricky one to review. It emerges directly from Hull's rich historical and geographical context, serving in Christian schools in Ontario for over 20 years, then working in teacher education at The King's University in Alberta for the remainder of his career. However, I believe the book is also worth reading for people who are not from Ontario or Alberta. A key focus of Hull's Ontario experience was the challenge of worldview-based Christian education. And in this context, he has some very important things to say to others who are involved in faith-based education. A key focus of Hull's Alberta context was the process of seeking and receiving partial government funding for independent private schools. Again, in this context, Hull's experience and insights can offer much to other schools and regions that are considering or seeking government funding support for education.

Hull's own aspirations for his book range even further. In the preface, Hull wrote:

This may sound overly ambitious, but I wrote this book for multiple audiences. Anyone who has been, is currently, or will one day be involved with the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition of alternative education has vested interests in the stories and issues that appear in this book. The narrative not only provides them with an overview of their legacy but also points a way forward. I also believe educators and supporters who have been, are currently, or will be involved in other faith-based traditions of education can learn much from the strengths and

weaknesses of this tradition. Finally, I am convinced that this book has valuable insights to share with those interested in public school reform. Over the course of my career as an educator, I have learned much from the vast literature that deals with the transformation of public schools, and I do not hesitate to say that the tradition of Neo-Calvinist education in Canada has equally important lessons to share in return. (xiii)

As I read the book, I was once again reminded of the wide range of experiences and keen insights that Hull offers to the Christian education community. Hull is not afraid to tackle complex issues and to ask tough questions. Indeed, some of you may recall "Aiming for Christian Education, Settling for Christians Educating" (Hull, 2003), an article in Christian Scholars Review, which prompted responses of outrage, ire, and righteous indignation ... as well as some careful reflective consideration and productive dialogue in a number of Christian school communities.

The structure of Hull's book is quite unique. He began by describing the story of "The Neo-Calvinist Tradition of Education in Canada," which he unfolded in fascinating detail. He identified three distinct stages, The Seeds of Hope (1945-1970), A Season for Hope (1970-2000), and Clinging to Hope (2000-2022). The second major section of the book is entitled "Dig Deeper," where he explored a number of significant factors that

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Sean Schat is Assistant Professor of Education at Redeemer University.

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shaped the story of these schools, factors that are also likely to transcend their specific context. In the third and final section, “Memoirs of an Educator,” Hull told his own story, tracing his educational journey from Nebraska to Iowa to Ontario to Alberta ... and into retirement. It strikes me that Hull was often “in the right place at the right time,” and, as a result, we can (and should) benefit from his retrospective reflection and analysis.

Given its audiences, purpose, and length, the book explored many important topics in extensive detail. However, for the purposes of our readership, I want to highlight three specific issues that I suspect will transfer particularly well to other contexts: government funding for Christian education, worldview- rooted Christian education, and the challenge of curriculum and curriculum design in Christian education.

### **1. Government Funding for Christian**

**Education.** Hull was working as a member of the faculty of education at The King’s University (Edmonton, Alberta) when he was elected chairman of the board of the Edmonton Society of Christian Education. As a result, he was directly involved in ground-level conversations with Christian education supporters and government representatives from Alberta’s Ministry of Education as they together explored the idea of partial funding for Alberta students who attended independent faith-based private schools. In 1999, Alberta approved partial funding for students in these schools. Hull carefully addressed contested issues, such as the impact of funding on the distinctive Christian character of the schools, the nature of government influence on the school’s curriculum, instruction, and hiring practices, as well as an exploration of some of the unanticipated positive outcomes that emerged for schools, students, and educational leaders. What is clear is that, despite some of the complications and concerns, the experience has been primarily positive and fruitful, and education in the province of Alberta has been blessed as a result.

### **2. Christian Education Rooted in a Christian Worldview.**

A significant stretch of Hull’s career

in education overlapped with the unfolding story of faith-based schools in Ontario, schools rooted in a distinctively reformed Christian approach to education. It is clear that Hull paid attention to significant details, stages, and issues in the process, and that he was well-connected with many of the key movers and shakers. As a result, he is well-positioned to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. For me, this was the most powerful element of the book. Hull identified many of the dispositions and practices required to develop excellent local board-led, teacher-driven Christian schools that seek to be faithful and obedient to God and His Word. As many readers know, this is not an easy venture, but it is one that matters greatly. The strength of Hull’s analysis, however, rests in his observation that most worldview-driven schools have failed to successfully pass this worldview on to the majority of their graduates. Worldview theory and theory-informed practice have not sufficiently equipped the next generation for worldview-faithful living. He carefully explored why this might be the case and concluded the book with a message of hope: the solution for this notable failure may already be present in a number of emerging initiatives in Christian education circles.

**3. The Challenge of Curriculum Design in Christian Education.** In retelling the stories of the schools and communities he served, Hull often returned to the pivotal intersection of worldview and curriculum design. Christian schools that seek to be faithful to their unique worldview foundations often face a conundrum when it comes to state-mandated or publisher-created curriculum programs and resources. The obvious solution is for teachers to function as curriculum designers, not simply curriculum implementers. This is important work. But this is not easy work, nor is it always done, or done well. The story of Ontario schools addresses this directly: it has not always been effective because schools often expect teachers to play a significant curriculum development role without (a) sufficient knowledge, (b) sufficient training, and (c) sufficient time. Rightfully, faith-based schools have recognized that their approach will only work if the teachers in the trenches develop their own curriculum and activities, designed to

authentically embody a worldview approach. But this has often not happened because of a lack of both teacher training/expertise and the dedicated time required to do curriculum design work (e.g., When would a teacher have time to do this and do it well?). This is both a structural and leadership issue, and Ontario's legacy speaks to it directly. Despite the challenges, Hull clearly saw hope in what has emerged in recent years.

The book contains a host of incisive insights and important questions, challenging common assumptions and practices in Christian schools, and also provides a number of authentic and appropriate suggestions for worldview-rooted change. While not afraid to call a spade a spade, Hull's book lives up to the title: he identified seeds of hope that have the potential to produce a bountiful harvest in Christian schools across the world.

## References

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