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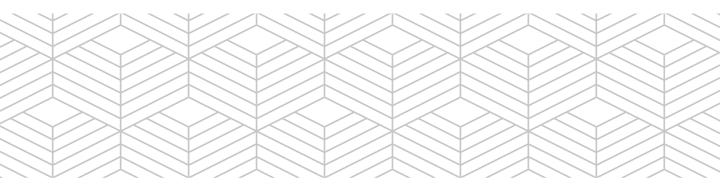


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INTRODUCTION...

INTRODUCTION





We asked several heads of schools to weigh in on the implications of these results. You will find these insights in articles throughout this report.

by Dan Egeler, Ed.D., President

Association of Christian Schools International

The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) has been a part of the education landscape in the U.S. for nearly 40 years. As I travel around the country and listen to school leaders, I hear the same message over and over: that families are coming to our schools with different expectations and motivations for choosing certain schooling options for their children.

As an association of Christian schools, we recognize that getting to a deeper understanding of these issues is crucial for the sustainability and flourishing of Christian education going forward. That is why ACSI commissioned Barna to help us answer some questions about the changing faith dynamic in America and how it impacts schooling decisions for families. We wanted to hear directly from parents, to listen to what is important to them when choosing a school for their children.

We are excited to bring the results of this research to you. Insights gleaned from the data, along with the implications for Christian schools, are explored in this report. Our prayer is that these findings will assist you in fulfilling your mission to make a Kingdom impact in the lives of your students.

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, several trends have increasingly come to shape the landscape for private Christian education in the United States. The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) commissioned Barna Group to explore these trends more deeply, providing concrete data to inform schools about the faith and education dynamics of American parents.

The first and most important macro trend impacting the landscape for Christian schools is the changing faith profile of American adults. The proportion of adults who affiliate with Christianity at all, or who cite an active faith, is shrinking precipitously, with the sharpest decline found among Millennials, those born between 1985 and 1999. In this context, choosing Christian education will become increasingly exceptional—and possibly even seem extreme.

The second and equally challenging trend concerns the proliferation of school options. An increase in public charter and magnet schools offers higher-quality options to families at no cost. The widespread adoption of computers and broadband Internet has increased the availability of educational resources and made online and remote education feasible for more families, opening up the possibility of homeschooling at every level.

Private schools, both Christian and non-Christian, compete for students with statistics on college placement and scholarships, standardized testing scores and more. Not only do these schools appear in Internet searches (which parents frequently utilize), they also advertise directly to families. In some hyper-supplied areas, such as New York city, even charter and magnet schools advertise and actively recruit students in order to attract high achievers that will raise their metrics of success.

In addition to these direct forces, a cultural shift toward personalized experiences also affects school choice. The individualized approach to schooling, where each

child has his own unique weekly schedule of activities and often even a separate school, may mean that ACSI schools will have to appeal to families as the "best fit" for each child's unique needs and gifts.

Finally, the experiences of Millennials, whose children are currently in preschool or early grades, will almost certainly change how ACSI schools interact with families. More school switching in younger parents' backgrounds has given them first-hand experience with a wider range of school types than earlier generations and primed them to move their own children from school to school as needed. In addition, delayed parenthood for Millennials means that the next generation of ACSI students will come from families with different structures and parents in different life stages.

Christian education is currently serving a small group of American families: Just 1 percent of children ages 5–19 attends an ACSI school. Macro trends suggest that figure is at risk of shrinking, and anecdotal evidence from schools suggests that many are already experiencing the challenge of gaining and retaining families.

While parents of children currently at ACSI schools show a high degree of satisfaction with their school and rate their school as outperforming other types of schools on almost every measure, prospective parents (whose children do not currently attend a private Christian school but would be open to it) are savvy school shoppers, many of whom are not aware of the benefits ACSI schools offer.



About the Research

A primary goal of this research was to clarify the decision-making process of parents as they respond to influences and information about schools for their children.

To understand the current and potential market for ACSI schools, Barna first conducted online focus groups with parents of K-12 students. Parents represented a range of school types and faith groups, with a total of 16 participating.

Subsequently, Barna surveyed four groups separately:

- + **971** parents of current ACSI students
- + **400** parents of prospective students
- + **221** parents of homeschooled students
- + **483** senior pastors of mostly Protestant churches

These five surveys varied in length and focus, as well as qualifications for participating:

Participating parents indicated they would be open to sending their child to a Christian school. There was no restriction on the religion of these parents.

Within each of the groups surveyed, Barna identified and analyzed subgroups through questions about the individuals' faith and ages.

- + Generational groups include **Millennials** (born 1985–1999), **Generation X** (born 1965–1983) and **Boomers** (born 1946–1964).
- + Faith groups include **evangelical**, **non-evangelical born again**, **notional Christians**, **non-Christian faiths** and **no religion**. These groups overlap with practicing and non-practicing Christians (determined by frequency of church attendance) and the denominational categories (Mainline and non-Mainline) of churches they attend.

Definitions

- + **Practicing Christians:** Practicing Christians are those who attend a Christian church service at least once a month, who say their faith is very important in their lives, and who identify with a Christian denomination.
- + **Born again:** people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents are not asked to describe themselves as "born again."
- + **Evangelicals:** meet the born again criteria (described above) plus seven other conditions. Those include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church attended. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as "evangelical."
- + **Non-evangelical born again:** meet the born again criteria described above, but not the evangelical criteria.
- + **Notional Christians:** Notional Christians are individuals who identify with a Christian denomination, but who do not meet the definition of born again.
- + **Mainline churches:** Includes Protestants from one of the following denominations: United Church of Christ, American Baptist, Episcopal, the Presbyterian Church USA, ELCA and United Methodist.
- + **Non-Mainline churches:** This category includes any Protestant denominations not covered in the Mainline category above. Major groups include Adventist, Assembly of God, Southern Baptist, Church of God, Evangelical, Nazarene, non-denominational churches, Pentecostal, Wesleyan, and so on.

In the pages that follow, we compile the responses from insiders and outsiders, current and future parents of ACSI students, looking for themes about what is working well, what desires are unfulfilled and what can continue to attract new families to private Christian schools.

FINDINGS...

FINDINGS



Current and Prospective Parents

The two primary survey groups are current ACSI parents and prospective parents. These two groups can also be thought of as "insiders," who have experienced ACSI schools firsthand, and "outsiders"—whose perceptions of Christian schools are most often based on reputation than experience. Millennials are a group of particular interest since their children are just beginning to enter K-12 schools.

Prospective parents are amenable to sending their children to private Christian schools, but for any number of reasons, have not chosen to do so. Current ACSI parents and prospective parents revealed different priorities and perceptions throughout the study. These parent groups have different needs or goals for their children's education and differ in the way they evaluate schooling decisions.

What currently distinguishes insiders from outsiders may not be the same characteristics that distinguish them in the future. Looking toward the future of the market for Christian schools, it is likely that, as more Millennials become parents of school-aged children, their group's experiences and perspectives will shift the average ACSI parent profile.

On the other hand, it could be that future ACSI parents will prioritize and perceive their education options the same way as the current group of ACSI parents. If future ACSI parents have the same ethnic, financial and faith profile as the current group, those future parents will be a more exceptional group among their peers.

Either way, future ACSI parents will come out of a changed group of American parents.

PARENTS WILL
COME OUT OF A
CHANGED GROUP
OF AMERICANS

Parents' Experience of Schools

Parents' experience with school types is diversifying. By generation, ACSI families have an increasingly broad range of school experiences. Different schools, and more types of schools, play a role in what ACSI parents know and perceive about the range of school options available to them.

Eighty-three percent of Boomer ACSI parents went to a public school, leaving 10 percent with a personal experience of private Christian schools and seven percent with another school experience. However, only 70 percent of current Millennial parents spent most of their education in public schools, and almost a third personally experienced private Christian schools.

That means that in a classroom of 20 students, currently mostly children of Generation X, about 17 children have parents who have been educated in public schools, 5 children have parents who have been educated in private Christian schools and a couple children have parents who had other educational experiences. (Some of those parents will have been to more than one type of school.)

However, if the current ACSI profile holds, as Millennials become the majority of ACSI parents, a classroom of 20 children will more likely have eight children with a parent who has been to a private Christian school and a few kids who have parents who were homeschooled.

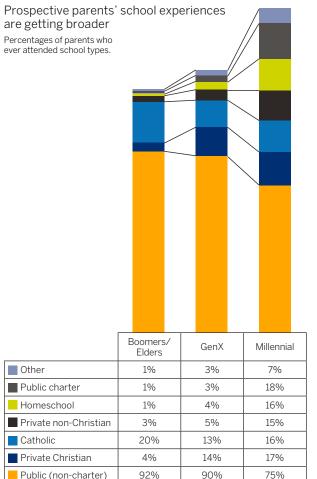


Schools are likely to feel the difference. Seventy-six percent of current parents say their own educational experience affects what they choose for their children. More (81%) say so if they are one of the younger generations with more diverse experiences.

The influence of parental educational experience grows according to how far parents pursued their own education. Eighty-four percent of parents with graduate degrees say that their own educational experience has a big influence on what they choose for their children.

One interesting finding is that parents' personal schooling experience is more influential for non-practicing and notional Christians, likely because practicing and born-again Christians have opinions of education based in their theology and Christian community.





Indeed, more than one-third (37%) of ACSI parents—and about half of evangelicals—say the Bible's teaching on education influenced them. They may refer to the many verses on pursuing wisdom; to the well-educated people of great faith such as Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah, Solomon and Paul; or just to God's calling to raise up children of faith, as in Deuteronomy 5.

A majority of the small group of prospective parents who have been to a private Christian school (13%) say they are at least somewhat likely to send a child to the same type of school. In a sample with more Millennials open to ACSI schools for their children, a clearer pattern might emerge.

In [Figure 1], the pattern of school experience across generations of parents is expanding.

Parents are more and more likely to have experienced a school type other than public.

They are also increasingly likely to have had more than one type of school experience—often due to moving or to school switching. There is a striking expansion in the number of homeschooled current and prospective parents, and a slight decrease in the percentage who have been to a Catholic school.

Parents' Knowledge of Local Schools

As expected, most ACSI parents are familiar with public schools in their area (94% say they are at least somewhat familiar). Fewer ACSI parents are familiar with magnet schools and online schooling (34% and 33% respectively). About half of ACSI parents are familiar with the private non-Christian schools in their area, indicating that parents do not engage in exhaustive research before finding a school for their children; they may already know what type of school would best suit their families.

ACSI parents whose second choice is to homeschool their children show a different pattern of knowledge about local schools, with much more focused attention on homeschooling options rather than on other varieties of school types.

Prospective parents, too, are generally familiar with the public schools in their area (79% say so), but only about a fifth of them are very familiar with private Christian schools. Of all prospective parents, some (10%) have had experience with sending their children to private Christian schools. About one-third would be happy to have their children attend, while an additional 57 percent would be open to having their children attend. This may seem unenthusiastic, but three-quarters of those parents give private Christian schools a high rating (8 or above out of 10) for general excellence.

Parents in the West are more familiar than those from other U.S. regions with all the different school types. Millennials are more familiar with the spectrum of school types than other generations.

Even so, it seems information that helps prospective parents anticipate the benefits of private Christian schooling might appeal to them, closing the gap in enthusiasm between what they anticipate and what current parents feel.



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How Parents Perceive ACSI Schools

To further understand why parents choose schools the way they do, the research explored what the type of school signaled to parents. The survey asked parents about the feel of different types of schools and how parents would describe the schools' environment, choosing from a list of words they would use to describe schools. Parents indicated a generally high view of ACSI

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schools, with a high proportion of both current and prospective parents choosing words that indicate trust in the schools' commitment to Christ and to nurturing children. Prospective parents, however, indicated slightly less positive impressions of ACSI schools.

The descriptions most current parents selected for private Christian schools were "Christ-centered" (95%), "respectful" and "loving." "Strict" is the least-selected word for Christian schools by ACSI parents. The commonly chosen "respectful" could be looked at as having a similar meaning with a positive connotation, and fewer implied conflicts between students, staff and teachers.

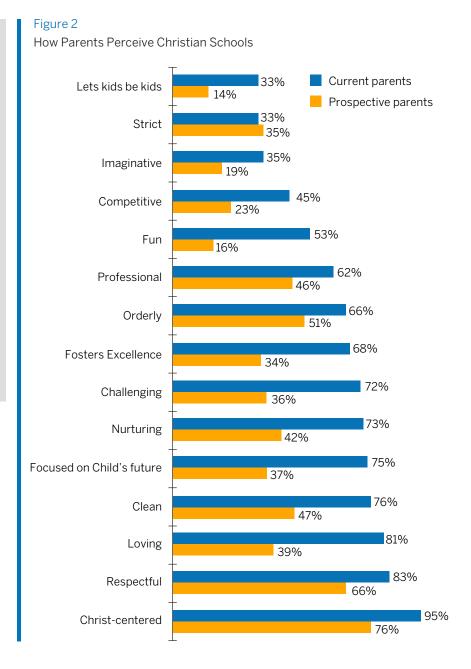
Similarly, "lets kids be kids" is a relatively uncommon choice, with only a third of ACSI parents selecting it. Parents may have some negative ideas about the phrase, for example, associating it with disorderliness (two-thirds describe their school as "orderly"). Others—for example, some of the parents interviewed in Barna's focus groups—consider "let kids be kids" in a positive light.

Current ACSI parents rate other schools more highly than private Christian schools on a few things—usually more negative than positive attributes. They more frequently describe private non-Christian schools as competitive, charter schools as imaginative and Catholic schools as strict.

When it comes to prospective parents' perceptions of private Christian schools, they choose characteristics in a similar order but somewhat less frequently. The most commonly chosen words to describe private Christian schools are "Christ-centered" and "respectful"—very much like ACSI parents. However, far fewer prospective parents describe Christian schools as loving, fun, or imaginative.

Many of these distinctions between prospective and current parents give the impression that parents recognize the positive qualities in Christian schools but do not feel enthusiastic about the schools until they have a child attending.

These findings illustrate a common perception and concern in marketing Christian schools- that one actually has to "be here" to "get it," i.e., one has to experience actually being a part of the school community to fully appreciate its value and its features. While it is probably impossible to recreate the active school community experience for a prospective parent or student, schools are well served to imaginatively create opportunities, such as "preview days," "shadow a student" days, and other experiences, to get parents and students on the campuses for an extended period of time, even a full day, to experience the community life of the school.



Goals of Education

When it comes to what they consider to be the purpose of education, both ACSI parents and prospective parents want more for their children than a list of accomplishments or a way to become wealthier. Parents clearly think of schools as meeting a complex range of student and family needs. Of course, that includes academic subjects. It also includes other ways of developing and nurturing children.

Barna asked current and prospective parents to choose the top five purposes of education. For both groups of parents, the most selected goal of education is to instill strong values. While it does not reveal what weight they would give to each one, this question identifies ranked priorities.

FOR BOTH GROUPS OF PARENTS, THE MOST SELECTED GOAL OF EDUCATION IS TO INSTILL STRONG VALUES.

This idea of 'instilling strong values' is an important space for Christian schools to fill. Part of a Christian school's value proposition is partnering with parents to instill the gospel, and gospel living, into the life and heart of the student. Both prospective and current parents, even non-Christian parents, would agree that instilling love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control are worthy goals of education, according to the research. This is the lifeblood of Christian education. To the extent this "core concept" can be pressed in marketing and retention, the research indicates it is a winning argument. Among current parents, there is some degree of "self-selection"- meaning, current parents have already made the decision to enroll their children in a Christian school. Then, that decision molds both the parents' perceptions, and those of their children. It is, therefore, incumbent on Christian schools not only to tout the benefits of their schools, but to help families understand and make the connections as to why those benefits are important to how they live.



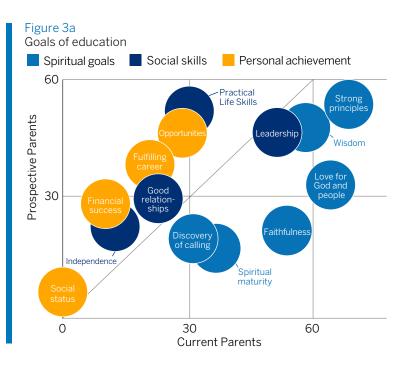
[Figure 3a] shows the importance of each educational goal to current ACSI parents compared with prospective parents. Above the diagonal line, goals are relatively more important to prospective parents. Below the diagonal line, goals are relatively more important to current parents.

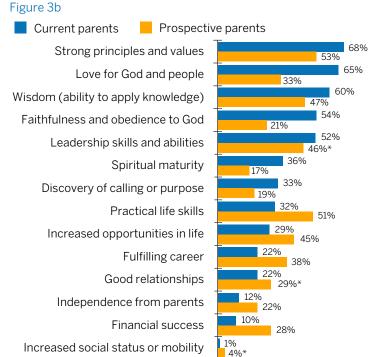
The goals that are closest to the diagonal line are those that are important to a similar percentage of current and prospective parents.

For example, "strong principles" is the farthest goal both to the top and the right on the chart, meaning that it is important to the highest percentage of current and prospective parents. Because it falls below the diagonal line, it is essential to a higher number of current parents.

On the other hand, "social status" is the lowest and farthest left of all the goals, making it the least important to each group. Because it falls above the diagonal line, it is essential to a higher number of prospective parents although to very few.

[Figure 3b] shows that prospective and current parents are most similar in how they value social skills. Current parents put a higher priority on spiritual goals and a lower value on personal achievement.







As a group, ACSI parents believe education is primarily for developing a child's character and spirituality, then academics and career. They do not believe education's ability to raise a child's socioeconomic status is nearly as important (though, note that ACSI families are in a higher socioeconomic bracket).

A majority of current parents selected five goals that included: love for God and other people, the ability to apply their knowledge (referred to as wisdom), faithfulness and obedience to God and leadership skills.

About a third of the current parent respondents selected spiritual maturity, discovery of calling or purpose, practical life skills or increasing opportunities in life as one of five top purposes of education. Twenty-two percent selected fulfilling career or good relationships; 12 percent selected independence from parents; 10 percent selected financial success; and one percent selected increased social status as one of the top five things schooling should do.

MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

Tim Greener, M.S.Ed., Superintendent of Schools, Christian Academy of Louisville School System

ACSI Board Member

Demographics play an important role in any organization's marketing strategy—including Christian schools. Who is your target audience? What grade levels do (and should) you offer? Can parents in the surrounding community afford your tuition—and if not, do you offer the right kind of financial aid? Who is your main competition for students?

We were surprised several years ago when we did a survey to identify our competitors, which we assumed were other Christian and Catholic schools in our community. We found, however, that public schools, which suffer from a poor reputation overall, were our chief competition! This was valuable information. It changed the way we market ourselves to prospective parents and our currently enrolled families.

This is a key point: We market to our currently enrolled families because they are our best marketers. The more good news we give them about our school, the less likely they are to look elsewhere and the more likely they are to speak highly of us to their friends.

As we looked at the findings from the Barna study, the first data point we noticed is that more than half of prospective parents are Gen-Xers (56%), while Millennials and Boomers nearly split the remaining 44 percent. That got us asking questions. What type

of media do Gen-Xers commonly use? What gets their attention? What do they value? Where are they spiritually, as a generational cohort? Answering these questions is essential to effective marketing.

The next finding that jumped out was parents' goals for their child's education, which fall into two main categories: spiritual and practical. (Spiritual goals include their child developing wisdom, good principles and values, and love for God and people, among other virtues. Practical goals include acquisition of life skills, career preparation, financial success and so on.) Current parents value spiritual goals about twice as much as prospective parents. In the area of "love for God and people," for example, one-third of prospective parents consider this a goal (33%) compared to two-thirds of current parents (65%). This trend is consistent for all the spiritual goals.

This prompted another series of questions. What's the cause of the difference between current and prospective parents? Do parents' values change after families enroll, or are parents who already share our values just more likely to choose Christian school? What can we do with our shadowing program, open houses, parent meetings and other marketing efforts that will give families an accurate picture of what they receive when they enroll in our schools?

Then we observed what prospective and current parents agree on, and considered the implications for marketing our school. There are six areas cited by both groups as important factors in their decision-making about various schools:

- 1. Safety
- **2.** Caring teachers
- **3.** Academic excellence
- **4.** Accessible teachers
- **5.** Character development
- **6.** College preparation

How many of the above-mentioned areas are highlighted in our current marketing materials? Are any of these six areas weak or in need of more emphasis? How do we know whether our teachers are caring, and how do we communicate effectively about their care? What evidence can we offer when it comes to character development or college preparation?

Our marketing strategy will not and should not be the same as yours, because our answers to these questions are different from yours—but it's important for all of us to ask the right questions, because the right questions lead to deeper inquiry and honest evaluation. I challenge you and your team to wrestle with the findings of this study in your own context, asking the right questions about how to communicate your school's values to the right audience.

What Parents Want

Most parents are looking for a school that aligns with their general ideas about education—what a school should do. However, parents' specific priorities when it comes to choosing a school seem to reveal another side to what they value in an education—what a school should be like

Safety's first. Next come quality teachers, academic excellence and character development.

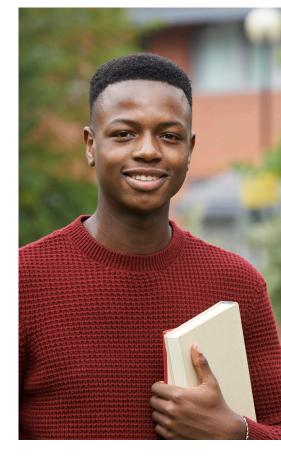
Barna asked current and prospective parents to rate 23 characteristics of a school from "essential" to "nice to have" to "not necessary." What follows is a detailed look at the characteristics that are most important to parents.

The factors most often ranked as essential in a school were a safe environment, teachers who really care about their students, academic excellence, accessible teachers, the way the school attempts to develop a child's character and that the school prepares the child for college.

For current ACSI parents, the lowest-ranked characteristics of a school were a convenient schedule, that the child's friends attend the school, that the parent's friends recommend the school and that the school be economically and ethnically diverse.

The twenty-three school characteristics Barna asked parents to rank can be collapsed into these categories, which will be further addressed following this section:

- + Academic + Extracurricular + Facilities
 - Nurture + Logistics + Social

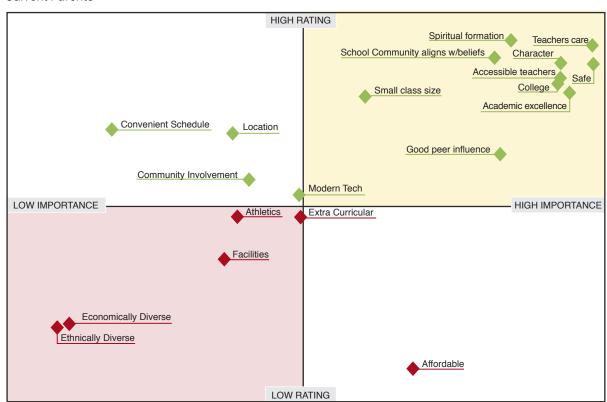


Safety's first. Next come quality teachers, academic excellence and character development.

In [Figures 4a & b], the placement of each label along the horizontal axis shows the importance of each characteristic to parents. The labels' placement along the vertical axis shows how parents rank Christian schools on a scale of 1 to 10: poor to excellent.

This chart shows that current parents prioritize what they also see to be ACSI schools' specialties (for example, "nurturing" characteristics), while not prioritizing what they see to be weaker aspects of ACSI schools (social characteristics). One notable exception is affordability, which is a high priority for all parents—higher for prospective parents; but few current parents give ACSI schools a high score for affordability.

Figure 4a
Current Parents



Importance: % of parents who consider attributes "essential" Rating: scale from 1 to 10, 1 being "poor" and 10 being "excellent"

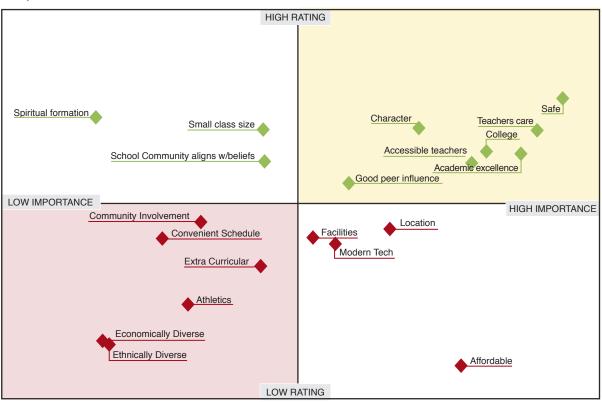
Current parents rate Christian schools very highly in nearly all factors, but especially the top factors that are important to them. Private schools come in a distant second in current parents' evaluations.

Millennial ACSI parents rate their schools a bit higher than the other generations in areas such as academics, peer influence, community involvement and convenient schedules for parents.

Prospective parents prioritize academic excellence, preparation for college, teachers that care and are accessible, affordability and character development. To them, spiritual formation in school is less important than to current ACSI parents.

This observation, as well as anything, underscores the importance of being academically excellent. Authentic Christian community, spiritual formation, and development of gospel-centric character are vital, but desiring such things is formed, in part, by continued exposure to the Christian school experience. Getting families in the door requires that we do the business of school well. It is not enough to say we educate well. How do we compare to the other private and public schools in our area, in terms of our academic product? It is no longer good enough to simply be a Christian school with marginal academics.

Figure 4b Prospective Parents



Importance: % of parents who consider attributes "essential" Rating: scale from 1 to 10, 1 being "poor" and 10 being "excellent"

Prospective parents rank Christian schools lower on perceived academic excellence than other types of schooling. Having a personal experience, it seems, as current parents, gives one a higher view. Thus, there appears to be both a perception problem and, perhaps, an actual one. It is incumbent upon ACSI schools to commit to higher level standards and continuous improvement, such as is encapsulated in the 'flourishing schools' model, and to continue up the growth continuum towards excellence. We must never confuse temporary success (good enrollment, a balanced budget) with excellence. Providing our best - the finest, well-paid, well-trained teachers, the most thoughtful, aligned curriculum, the best practices in instruction and use of formative assessments - is our act of worship to the Lord (Rom. 12:1). God is worthy of our first-fruits, not our mediocrity. Once we have committed to excellence within our own schools, we have to broadly and consistently message what that excellence means and what it looks like to our school families. Current parents and alumni then become evangelists for the school with prospective parents.

Academic Excellence

Academic excellence is the top priority for both current and prospective parents. Nearly all (95%) of current ACSI parents say it is essential. For prospective parents, that number is slightly lower, at 88 percent. Surprisingly, parents do not consider academic excellence more important as their children grow older.

How do ACSI schools meet expectations for academic excellence? The answer seems to be, "quite well." More than one-third of ACSI parents (38%) give their schools a 10 out of 10 for academic excellence. Altogether, 86 percent rate the school a seven or above, and more than two-thirds of ACSI parents choose "fosters excellence" to describe private Christian schools—ranking them far above other types of schools.

Fewer prospective parents share that view. They give lower scores to private Christian schools, with 29 percent saying that Christian private schools have the highest academic standards and 75 percent rating the schools a seven or above. About a third of prospective parents (34%) associate private Christian schools with "fosters excellence" (figure 5), putting them far below perceptions of Catholic and private non-Christian schools.

It is not clear where this difference in perceptions comes from, except that those with a personal experience of ACSI schools have a much higher view of the schools' academics. This research cannot tell us whether prospective parents would send their children to ACSI schools if they had a better image of their level of academic excellence. However, it does identify a perception barrier for some parents, especially those prospective parents who consider academic excellence a top priority.

Parents

Parents

Parents

Parents

[Figure 5] shows the differences in how current and prospective parents rate school types for dimensions of academic excellence. Current parents give their ACSI schools much higher scores than any other type—with the exception of associating private non-Christian schools more closely with competitiveness.

At the same time, prospective parents associate academic excellence more strongly with Catholic, private non-Christian, and charter schools than with private Christian schools.

Figure 5 Perceptions of Academic Excellence Across School Types Fosters Excellence Competitive Challenging Focused on my Child's future Private Christian Private non-Christian Catholic Charter Public %69 %89 49% 47% 45% 40% 39% 37% 36% 32% 32% 31% 30% 23% 18% %9 Current Prospective Current Prospective Current Prospective Current Prospective Current Prospective

Barna Group 25

Parents

Parents

Parents

Parents

Parents

Parents



Spiritual Development

One of the clearest differentiators for ACSI families is their emphasis on the spiritual goals of schooling. While all of the parents Barna surveyed gave high priority to character development, current parents and (evangelicals) especially desire spiritual development for their children.

Most current ACSI parents believe that character and spiritual development are among the ultimate purposes of education. Of the 16 choices given (including "other"), parents chose three of the five spiritually focused goals as the most important five goals of education.

Figure 6

Goal	Current Parents	Prospective Parents
Strong principles and values	68%	53%
Love for God and people	65%	33%
Faithfulness and obedience to God	54%	21%
Spiritual maturity	36%	17%
Discovery of calling or purpose	33%	19%

In general, ACSI parents considered spiritual purposes of education to be dominant, both in frequency (they used more than half of their choices to select spiritual development priorities) and in intensity.

Most current ACSI parents (75%) state that teaching Christian values at school is very important. Evangelical parents, at 87 percent, are more likely than other faith segments to believe teaching Christian values at school is very important. The importance of teaching Christian values at school is consistent across generations.

This is not true of prospective parents, who put spiritual purposes of education on equal standing (in terms of the number of times selected) with social skills and personal achievement. This is an important context: it is not that spiritual development is unimportant to prospective parents, it is that other factors are equally important.

When asked to label school characteristics, far fewer prospective parents (26%) said that spiritual formation in school was essential. Like evangelicals among ACSI parents, the small group of evangelicals among prospective parents said spiritual formation in school was essential to their families at a much higher rate (53%). "Strong values / principles" was the educational outcome most prospective parents chose as essential (53%).

Non-evangelical born again Christians do not hold as strongly to Christian values taught at school. More precisely, strong values and a love for God's people are important to non-evangelical born again Christians, but faith / obedience to God and spiritual maturity fall further down the list.

It seems that ACSI schools do fulfill these expectations, especially for current parents. More than half of current parents gave Christian schools the highest score (10 of 10) for being deliberate about developing children's character (59%) and spirituality (66%). In both categories, over 97 percent of parents give the schools a score higher than six out of 10.

Prospective parents rank ACSI schools much lower on these two measures (35% gave a perfect 10 of 10 for character development and 42% gave a 10 of 10 for spiritual development). However, about three-quarters of prospective parents gave a score of six of 10 or better on those two dimensions of spiritual development.

NEARLY ALL CURRENT

ACSI PARENTS BELIEVE

THE ATMOSPHERE OF

THEIR CURRENT SCHOOL

IS CHRIST-CENTERED.

Nearly all current ACSI parents believe the atmosphere of their current school is Christ-centered (95%). The second and third most-chosen descriptions are "respectful" and "loving." These choices further show that parents do indeed see ACSI schools fulfilling the spiritual and character development goals that they value so highly.

So it seems that current parents are happy with the effort that they see the schools putting into their children's spiritual development. They

associate their schools with Christ-centeredness, respectfulness and love—showing that the schools not only rank high in effort but in the results parents see. It also seems that those with a personal experience of ACSI schools think more highly of what the schools offer their families in this dimension.



Teachers, Students and Relationships at School

Children experience a wide range of relationships at school, but the primary ones are with peers and teachers. How important do parents consider these relationships? How do they rank ACSI schools among other school types? And how do they think ACSI schools are performing?

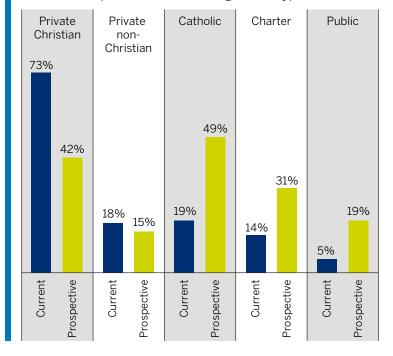
Current and prospective parents give mid-level priority to the social aspects of a school—a child's relationships with teachers and other students.

That said, "teachers who really care about their students" is the attribute ACSI parents are most likely to say is essential (tied with safety) and slightly fewer (94%) parents select accessible teachers as essential. Likewise, almost all prospective parents believe caring and accessible teachers (91% and 80%, respectively) are essential to schooling.

Parents—especially ACSI parents—generally want small class sizes for their children. This attribute likely indicates to parents that their child will get the personal attention from teachers that nearly all deem essential.

Teachers aside, parents do not generally make decisions based on social aspects of schooling—diversity in ethnicity or economic background or existing friendships. ACSI parents are even less likely to make decisions based on those factors than prospective families are.

Figure 7
Parents' Perceptions of How Nurturing School Types Are



However, there is dimension of a school's environment where friendships play a big role: whether other students are a good influence on their child. Eighty-three percent of current parents and 62 percent of prospective parents say it is essential for their child to have classmates who influence him or her well.



Athletics and Extracurricular Activities

Non-school activities their children could engage in are not as important as other aspects of education to families who would or do go to ACSI schools.

Athletics are an essential part of school to a larger proportion of ACSI parents than prospective parents (46% versus 38%), as are extracurricular activities (55% versus 48%). This may be due to the character-building opportunities to cultivate spiritual goals through team sports and other activities. Parents' interest in these extracurricular activities may have more to do with discipleship than the activity itself.

In general, ACSI schools impress only 20 percent of current parents as deserving a 10 / 10 for their athletic programs and for extracurricular activities. A majority (78%), however, believe their schools are generally good at providing athletics programs, giving them a score above seven out of 10. Seventy-nine percent give their schools a seven out of 10 or above for extracurricular activities. This indicates that they see the school as having a quality program but not an elite one.

On most measures, current ACSI parents give their schools higher rankings than prospective parents, but when it comes to athletics and extracurricular activities, more prospective parents than current parents give private Christian schools the highest possible score. This means that prospective parents have a more positive impression than reality in this area. Almost half of parents in the Northeast but only 21 percent of parents in the South ranked private Christian schools as excellent (at least a nine out of 10) for sports.

Logistics and Cost

Families must take the basic mechanics of their school choice into consideration. Will they be able to afford the school? How will their child get there every morning? Often, the answer to these questions can rule a school out for a family. In this group of logistics priorities, parents answered questions about whether they found a school affordable, its location accessible and its schedule convenient.

On the overall "important factors" list for making school decisions, prospective parents are more likely to say that logistics are essential.

Cost

The cost of Christian schools is the biggest barrier to families with more than one child and also to prospective parents. Further, paying tuition is the area where most ACSI families have to make sacrifices.

Figure 8 Sacrifices Current Parents Make to Send Child to ACSI School

	Total
Pay more	82%
Drive further than closest school	54%
Get involved in your child's school	49%
Work more hours	41%
Change jobs	13%
Attend a church that is connected to this school	9%
Move your family	8%
None of the above	4%

The burden of these sacrifices is different for families at various income levels. For example, only 35 percent of parents whose income is \$100,000 or more each year work more hours in order to send their child to an ACSI school. For families whose income is less, 50 percent of parents work longer hours to send their child to a Christian school.

Affordability is the only attribute that is both important to current parents and one on which they rank ACSI schools low. Seventy-one percent of current parents say affordability is an essential school characteristic. Only eight percent of parents give their school the ideal score for affordability.

Cost is the critical survival factor for the future of Christian schooling. Christian private schools are a product people want, according to this study. By a margin of 21 percent to the next closest option, private Christian school is the preferred school of prospective parents if cost were not a factor. By this study, there is an ample market for good Christian schools in most communities where schools can make it affordable for parents to have their students there. This means several things. First, it means working every possible angle¬: fundraising, third party income streams (side businesses, real estate holdings, market investments, alternative programming, and other options), advocating for school choice in one's state, and diligent cost control - to keep school as affordable as possible. Second, it means creatively communicating up front to families that cannot afford the full cost of tuition to help them understand how an education at a Christian school is possible, through financial aid programs, school choice initiatives, congregational funding sources, grandparents, and the testimonies of current parents. Sometimes, families simply need a vision for how it can be done, a testimony of how God provides through another family. Finally, there are times when the question is not affordability, but value: does the family value the school's educational product such that they are willing to make the economic sacrifices necessary to make it work? Many families can afford it, but choose to spend discretionary income elsewhere. Once again, this is when effectively articulating and repeating the school's value proposition, and letting school families verify that value with their testimonies, help prospective families and current families alike make that value decision in favor of the school.

ALMOST A THIRD (32%)
OF PROSPECTIVE PARENTS SAY
THEY WOULD PAY MORE TO SEND
THEIR CHILD TO THEIR IDEAL
SCHOOL, YET THEY HAVE NOT
ACTED UPON THAT PROPENSITY.

Prospective parents are more likely than current parents to say logistics, such as schedule and school location, are essential components to choosing a school. Current parents have already made the decision, so logistics are no longer a barrier for them. This is consistent with developing any relationship, whether it is a marriage, a friendship, a faith relationship with Christ, or a church or school. The relationship is based upon logical factors, to a point. At some point, one enters the relationship upon some degree of faith, which then becomes verified and confirmed by experience. Sometimes, helping prospective families understand this progression, and that what they believe are barriers at first do not become barriers once they see the value of the school in their children's lives, can be very helpful as they make their decision. If a school can provide transportation options, access to other families that live in the prospective parents' neighborhood who can reach out and set up carpooling arrangements, and flexible scheduling, such as after-school care, these logistical issues become even less significant than before. Prospective and current ACSI parents feel roughly the same about the cost of education at ACSI schools, with only 36 percent of current parents and 38 percent of prospective parents giving the school a score above seven out of 10. Cost is more of a deterrent in rural than in urban areas.

Interestingly, 20 percent of ACSI parents can send only one of their children to the school because of the cost. This means that many more children from the same families might have the educational experience ACSI parents are so pleased with, if the cost for multiple children were within their budget.

As for prospective parents, many of them say they would send their children to a private Christian school if the tuition were within their reach. If cost were not a factor, more prospective parents (38%) would prefer to send their children to private Christian schools than any other type.

Simultaneously, almost a third (32%) of prospective parents say they would pay more to send their child to their ideal school, yet they have not acted upon that propensity. The gap in what they are willing to pay—which, surprisingly, does not vary by income—and the cost to send a child to a private Christian school indicates that a significant proportion of prospective parents are truly candidates for private Christian school.

Travel Time

Travel time is second on the list of sacrifices parents have to, and are willing to make for a Christian education. More than half drive farther than the closest school to bring their child to an ACSI school, and eight percent (representing more than one child in a class of 20) have moved their families in order to send a child to Christian school. It seems, though, that these parents do not believe their current schools' location is a burden that reflects poorly on the school; they rank ACSI schools quite high for accessible location.



According to current ACSI parents, their schools are in convenient locations. They rank their schools higher than any other type—including public schools—for accessible location. More than three-quarters say their school is in a good place. A majority give the schools the second-highest (8 or 9 out of 10) rating for location, indicating that the location is not ideal, but it is quite good.

Prospective parents are not as enthusiastic, but they still give Christian schools an average rating on location, indicating that this is a barrier for some parents. When it comes to how important this is to prospective parents, it falls somewhere in the middle among the important factors. Interestingly, a school's location is more important to Millennials.

Forty-three percent of all prospective parents are willing to drive farther to get to their ideal school, and a quarter are willing to move their families in order to send their children to a better school.

However, a school's address can be a barrier, especially for urban families. Having children at different school locations is less of an issue for those in rural areas than other locations. Location keeps about 16 percent of prospective families from sending their children to their ideal school.

Facilities

Technology and facilities are also logistical factors affecting school choice. To ACSI families, up-to-date facilities rank similarly to location as a priority, whereas they put a higher priority on modern technology.

Current parents at ACSI schools rate their schools highest among all school types in terms of facilities, as well as modern technology. While only 15 percent give their school a 10 / 10 for up-to-date facilities, more than half (58%) give their schools a high score (eight out of 10 or higher).

Modern technology is a higher priority to current parents than other aspects of the school's facilities. Again, ACSI parents give private Christian schools the highest score of all types of schools, but lower scores compared to other attributes (only 21 percent give ACSI schools 10 / 10, while 84 percent score their school seven out of 10 or higher). This implies that parents may envision a higher level of sophistication than schools have achieved.



Special Needs

About nine percent of current parents say they are not sending one of their children to their ACSI school because it cannot accommodate the child's special needs. Similarly, about 10 percent of prospective families—22 percent in urban areas—cannot send their child to their preferred school (which is quite often a private Christian school) because the school cannot accommodate their child's needs. Further research could explain what these needs are—and whether private Christian schools could compete for students who have specialized learning needs.

Schedule

A majority of ACSI parents are pleased with how their school's schedule fits their family lives. However, they also rank the school's schedule low on their list of factors for choosing schools.

Prospective parents rank school schedules higher in importance than spiritual formation and social aspects of the school, such as existing friends at the school and diversity. This may mean that these parents have less flexibility in their own schedules and need more support in the form of extended hours or after-school programs. When prospective parents rate Christian schools' schedules, they place them in a three-way tie for first place, along with public schools and charter schools—a good sign that they believe Christian schools can accommodate their needs.

As we have all come to realize, safety is a primary concern for current and prospective families. We emphasize physical safety by putting passive and active security measures in place, and educating students on contingency plans in ways that do not scare them or their parents. We also talk about emotional safety, creating an environment where love and respect are emphasized as positive virtues, where the power of community is preached, so that bullying and victimization are minimized and dealt with effectively. How often, though, do we tout the virtues of academic and spiritual safety? Academic safety, meaning that being a good student and offering studies as an act of worship before the Lord is valued to some degree by both students and teachers alike, such that asking questions, exploring new ideas, and taking those academic risks that help us grow and thrive? Spiritual safety, meaning space where one can question one's faith, challenge one's assumptions, ask hard questions and trust one's teachers will not shut him down but will help him explore the answers, all while turning him to the God who loves and guides him? These are powerful practices in most Christian schools, or ought to be where they are not. Where they are in practice, should schools be doing a better job in educating families why these aspects of safety are important, and why Christian schools do this better than most schools?

Safety

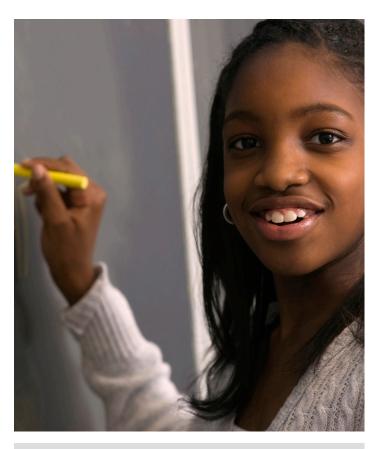
Safety is at the top of the list of essential school characteristics for more than 90 percent of the parents Barna surveyed. Safety can mean anything from a toxin-free building to a padded playground to safety from bullying. However, it can also include "cultural" safety, such as feeling safe to ask questions or express doubt, learning to work through differences or a general sense of belonging and respect. Based on findings from qualitative research and discussions with parents, prospective parents are thinking of their children's physical and emotional safety from other children in the school. However, ACSI parents are more likely to be thinking about safety to include physical and emotional safety, as well as the freedom to ask questions or raise doubt, e.g. related to their faith.

Middle and high school children more often face violence in school than out of it. In 2015, eight percent of students said they were in a fight on school property. Even so, bullying is more common than assault. In 2013, almost a quarter of middle-and high-school-aged children reported being bullied.

Much worse violence often makes the news in the United States, such as the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. However, in focus groups, parents did not often mention this type of random violence as a major concern. They often assume a foundational level of safety, but are concerned about threats from peers or excessive negative cultural influences.

In the face of these types of threats, parents and children feel secure at ACSI schools. Nearly half give their schools the highest possible score, while 90 percent give them a high score (of eight out of 10 or higher). Outside perceptions by prospective parents are very similar.

- 1 http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=49
- 2 http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/trends/ 2015_us_violence_trend_yrbs.pdf
- 3 http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=719



This appears to be a potential growth area for some Christian schools. If traditional covenant schools with closed enrollment have or are considering changing their admission policies to admit children of non-believing parents as an evangelical or outreach ministry, the research seems to indicate a market of parents who, while not Christians themselves, are not afraid of having their students in a Christian school. Indeed, given the findings that safety is such a key motivating factor for prospective and current families alike, it follows that prospective families, even those who are not hostile to Christianity but are simply nonreligious, would see Christian schools as a physically and emotionally safe environment for their children.

Why Non-Christian Parents Send Their Kids to Christian Schools

The sample of current ACSI parents included very few who identified as a religion other than Christian. These non-Christian parents value the academics, affordability and personal safety in a private Christian school.

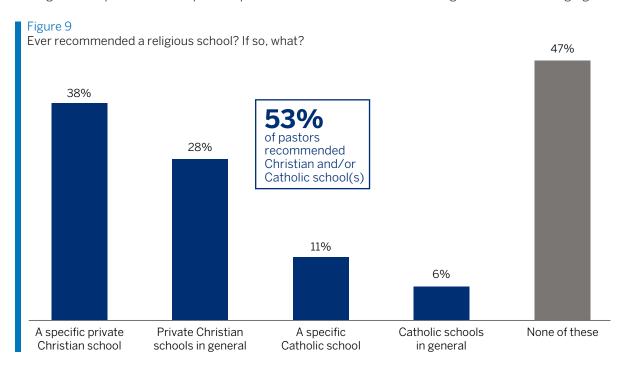
Each non-Christian parent gave a different answer when answering, "What are the main reasons you would consider sending your child to a private Christian School?" One mother explained, "I want my child to receive an excellent education, have caring teachers and be surrounded by kind children. I do not want my child to be surrounded by bullies and disruptive children."

Non-Christians appear more frequently among prospective parents - those who are open to sending their child to a Christian school, but do not do so currently. In the survey sample, 50 individuals, or 8 percent of the sample, identified as something other than Christian or Catholic. This group sees private Christian schools as having about the same level of excellence as self-identified. Christians. They are less likely to rate safety at school and academic excellence as essential, though the vast majority still do so (86% and 78%, respectively). Unsurprisingly, they are less likely than Christians to require that a school align with their personal beliefs (32% say it is essential).

Pastors Weigh In

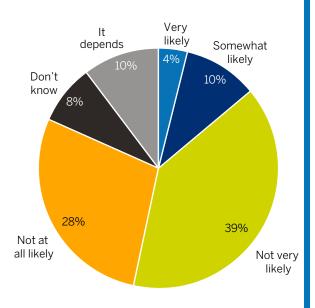
As a part of this study, the researchers surveyed pastors about whether they believed that Christians should try to send their children to Christian schools, what they recommended and where they saw Christian schools fitting in among other avenues for spiritual development. If pastors influence some parents, what kind of influence do they have?

The answer seems to be that Protestant pastors deliberately exert little influence over parents to send their children to private Christian schools. A total of 53% have ever recommended a Christian or Catholic school, and among Mainline pastors that drops to 29 percent who have recommended a religious school to a congregant.



When predicting future recommendations [in Figure 10], only 4 percent of pastors who have not recommended a private Christian school in the past believe they are very likely to do so in the future, and only 10 percent think there is a moderate chance. Again, there is a big gap between Mainline and non-Mainline pastors' answers: 39 percent of Mainline pastors say they are not at all likely to recommend a private Christian school to anyone, while only 16 percent of non-Mainline pastors say so.

Figure 10 Likelihood to Recommend Christian School (if not ever done so, 47%)



When answering the question, "Christian parents should make every effort possible to send their children to a Christian school," only nine percent of Protestant church leaders agreed strongly, with less than a third (30%) agreeing at all. In fact, a quarter of senior pastors disagreed strongly with that statement.

If a child were to go to a private religious school, however, Protestant pastors seem to prefer that the school also be Protestant: 53 percent disagreed that it was just as acceptable to send a child to Catholic school as to send him or her to a (non-Catholic) private Christian school.

This pattern may be because pastors in general consider the responsibility of spiritual education to fall on parents and churches. Other anecdotal evidence suggests that pastors do not want parents who cannot afford private school tuition to feel unnecessarily pressured, and that many pastors wish to express support of members of their congregation who teach in public schools.

Since the majority (71%) of ACSI parents go to non-Mainline churches, it might be most helpful to look at pastors from churches most like theirs. When asked why parents should send a child to a Christian school, the majority of non-Mainline pastors selected spiritual education (52%), spiritual formation (52%), character development (66%) and a Biblically integrated curriculum (66%). It seems that pastors who do consider Christian schools a useful component in children's spiritual development affirm these spiritual benefits.

Mainline and non-Mainline pastors answered questions about the value of Christian schools very differently. The starkest difference is between the 35 percent of Mainline pastors who value a Biblically integrated curriculum and the 75 percent of Southern Baptist pastors who value it. The issue of safety is also considerably less important to Mainline pastors (33%) than to non-Mainline pastors (48%) as a reason to send children to a Christian school.

Among prospective parents, it seems Millennials are significantly more likely to seek advice from their pastor or church leader (21% said a church leader influenced their school choice, compared with 12% of the total). However, this difference does not exist among ACSI Millennial parents (9% for Millennials and total), suggesting it is possible that prospective parents' pastors may in fact convince them it is not important to send a child to a Christian school. This is an area for further exploration, as sample sizes of Millennials in this study were small.

"ONE MISSION UNDER GOD... INDIVISIBLE?": CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

Robert "Bo" Gutzwiller, M.A., Superintendent, Foothill Christian School ACSI Board Member

Jerry Kitchel, Director of Advancement, Foothill Christian School Adjunct Professor of Communications at Azusa Pacific University

We believe Christian schools build generations of spiritually grounded, academically empowered young people who make a difference in our world. Barna's findings in this report reveal that families are seeking Christian schools with these outcomes in mind for their children. The findings also confirm that ACSI schools are having a significant impact on a new generation of students and families.

This is valuable market information for Christian schools, especially with regard to Millennial parents. But the data also show a correlating alignment with the evangelical church's mission to make disciples. Surprisingly, however, few pastors endorse Christian education as part of parents' school choice process. This is a significant area of opportunity for Christian schools.

It is helpful to look at the factors that are important to parents who have chosen to enroll their children at an ACSI school alongside their ratings of how well the schools have actually performed in those areas. Four of the top factors listed by parents who chose an ACSI school are related to matters of faith and values, spiritual formation, character development and other relationship-based dynamics. Factors in school choice include:

- Developing character: 94 percent are looking for a school that is intentional about developing character
- Community: 84 percent are looking for a school community that aligns with their beliefs
- Spiritual formation: 82 percent prefer a school that is intentional about spiritual formation
- Teachers: 98 percent value a faculty that cares about students and is accessible

Academics are also highly rated (95%), but the majority of influencing factors center on the aspects listed above. Similarly, parent goals for education include developing a love for God and people, strong

values, faithfulness, wisdom, obedience to God and leadership. Isn't it interesting that parent goals for their children's education and the goals of good disciple-making are congruent?

The ratings given by parents after their experience at an ACSI school demonstrate that schools typically meet or exceed parent expectations on nearly every critical factor. Actual satisfaction ratings from ACSI parents are:

Developing character: 91%

Community: 91%

Spiritual formation: 94%

Teachers: 92%

Families find ACSI schools to be exactly what they were hoping for!

Until late in the 20th century, teachings of invaluable biblical truth were recognized and embedded in the very foundation of our country's educational system. But who can argue today that those same values have been, and continue to be, steadily challenged by the spread of secular thought and a culture in moral decline?

In the '60s (when our school was founded) and well into the '70s, church leaders and congregations saw a world threatened by Cold War, civil unrest, political instability and even the threat of nuclear annihilation. The Christian school movement, sponsored mainly by churches, exploded across the country because church leaders believed our children needed to be fully prepared for the uncertain world they would inherit. During that same season, the ACSI movement, composed of church leaders, pastors and educators, advanced the cause of Christian education to establish its vital place in society.

Sadly, the strong bond that once linked Christian education, churches and the broader Christian community together in a shared calling looks very different today.

Ideas and Questions

- 1. How can we grow stronger together?
- 2. Would academic research looking at pastors' attitudes and perceptions about Christian schools (similar to the Barna research about parent perceptions) be helpful to ascertain? For instance, what do church leaders believe is the quality of our academic programs and the effectiveness of our Christian distinctives? Are there differences in attitudes/perceptions and support from pastors who have their own children enrolled in a Christian school vs. pastors who do not?
- 3. What are ways to initiate dialogue and build stronger relationships with pastors/church leaders who serve communities in shared areas of influence?
- 4. How can Christian school administrators be proactive to include church and pastor networking in our enrollment strategies?
- 5. As Christian school leaders how can we help enlighten or re-familiarize pastors and church leaders about our similar mission?
- 6. How can Christian school administrators make the data/ findings available to church leaders about the positive dimensions and outcomes of Christian education?
- 7. Independent Christian schools are currently being scrutinized in efforts to categorize them as schools, rather than faith-based ministries deserving of constitutional protection. Should they consider developing an affiliation with a church ministry in the days ahead to provide better protection for their religious liberty?
- 8. How many new Christian schools are opening each year and who is championing these efforts? Is the church taking the initiative or is it concerned citizens and business leaders?
- 9. Are there more things we can be doing in collaboration given the increasing legislative hostility toward the church and its first amendment rights?

When parents were asked if "the opinions or experiences of church leaders influenced their choice of school" (religious vs. public) only 9 percent of parents acknowledge pastors playing a part in their decision. The disconnect here is puzzling. Like the pull of the moon on the ocean's tide, the Church has always had an "action-reaction" relationship with culture. As trends develop and society changes, especially away from biblical morals, the Church has always responded to stem the cultural undertow and equip believers to live a biblical lifestyle.

But there has been a steady and gradual distancing between churches and Christian schools. Why? If not the whole community of believers, who will stand in the gap and advocate for Christian education for such a time as this?

From a pulpit perspective, ACSI founding president Paul Kienel describes the weekly dilemma a pastor faces: "On any given Sunday, there are Christian school educators and public school educators in almost every service. If the pastor speaks out in support of either group, he risks offending the other."

A pastor who seeks to relate to his or her congregation as a unified family might find tension in referencing Christian schooling versus public education. That said, one must agree that scripture doesn't make a case for children being taught by non-believing teachers, but rather those who view biblical truth in a manner compatible with the child's parents.

So what could this imply for the relationship between the priorities of a church and a Christian school? Dr. Kienel sees it this way: "Both institutions are essential to the spiritual and intellectual well-being of future church members and the greater Christian community." The effectiveness of private Christian schools on this front—that is, Christian school graduates becoming responsible church members—is clearly supported by the Cardus Education Survey: Private Schools for the Public Good (2014). The longitudinal study demonstrates that the Christian school's mission (and its effectiveness) is in clear alignment with the mission of evangelical churches.

The findings from Cardus and Barna should be incredibly encouraging to Christian school administrators. The mission of Christian schools is being fulfilled, and one key benefactor is the Church. Christian schools have a great story to tell—but we need to do a better job telling it.

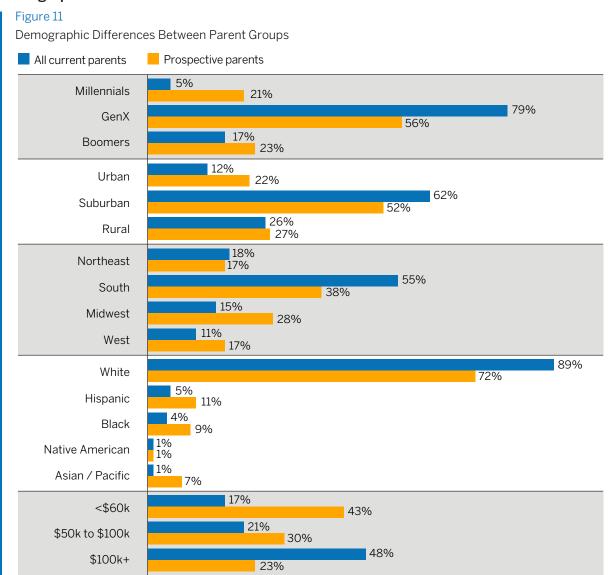
The Barna findings should serve to motivate serious reflection by school and church leaders alike. Christian school leaders must take a proactive approach to initiate conversations with local pastors. It's not just about providing talking points; we must create venues for dialogue and relationship-building. Hosting a luncheon on campus for area pastors could be helpful. Or consider offering to speak at the local ministerial association.

ASCI President Dan Egeler emphasizes the role of ACSI as a convener, not a container. Perhaps school administrators can take a similar approach to church leaders, bringing companion ministries together in order to better function as the "Church beyond the walls." Our missions are aligned. Now we must strengthen the partnerships that can fulfill the mission.

General Profile of Parents

Current ACSI parents, prospective parents and homeschool parents have different socioeconomic, geographic and faith profiles. They also differ from the population in general in that their faith is generally more important in their lives than it is for the average American. A note on ACSI parents: participants in this survey are a sample of the ACSI population and are not fully representative (schools were chosen to represent the diversity of types of ACSI schools).

Demographic Profiles



General Profile of Parents

ACSI parents are more concentrated in Southern states and suburbs. A large majority are Gen-Xers, white, practicing Christians who attend Protestant, non-Mainline churches.

Many prospective parents are non-practicing Christians who also live in the suburbs and are white. Their average age is 42.

While their group profile is similar to that of ACSI parents, prospective parents are somewhat more evenly spread across races, generations, geographical areas, income levels and faith subgroups.

ACSI parents are more likely than prospective parents or American parents in general to be white—partly due to the fact that they are more likely to be Gen-Xers, while Millennials (at this point, more likely to be non-parents or prospective parents) are both the biggest generation and the most diverse.

Compared to American parents of school-aged children in general, ACSI families have a much higher socioeconomic status. For example, only 38 percent of the parents of school-aged children in the U.S. have parents who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher⁴, while 71 percent of ACSI parents have at least a four-year college degree.

Almost half of ACSI parents (48%) make \$100,000 a year or more. This is a significant difference from prospective parents—of whom only 23 percent make over \$100,000 a year. The average American family makes a little over \$68,000 per year.⁵

When it comes to family life, ACSI families are far more likely than the average American family to have two parents living at home with their children. Of the sample of ACSI parents who took the survey, 92 percent were married with kids at home. Of U.S. children in general (0–17 years old), 64 percent live with two married parents, and of white U.S. schoolchildren, 75 percent live with two married parents.⁶

(Although the U.S. census data is about the households children live in and this study asked about parents' households, each of the parents in this survey represents a child, allowing for a useful comparison.)

While the majority of this sample of ACSI parents are Gen-X suburban Christians in the South, the prospective group is more likely to live in urban areas, to be Millennials and to earn less than \$60,000 a year—a sign of demographic changes in the U.S.

⁴ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cce.pdf

⁵ https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.pdf

⁶ http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables/fam1a.asp?popup=true

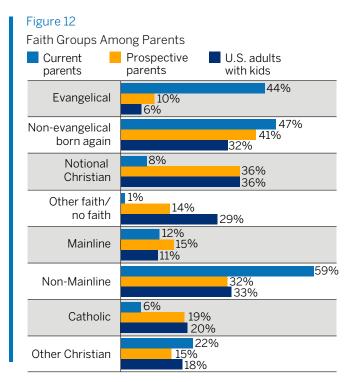
Faith Profile

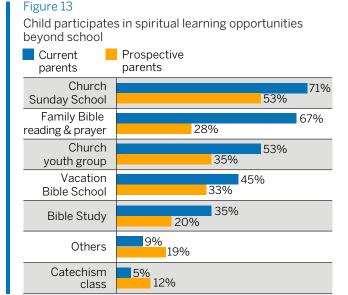
In the practice of their faith, ACSI parents show quite a lot of consistency. Only eight percent are notional Christians, compared to more than a third of the prospective group. ACSI parents are much more likely to be evangelical, the most theologically conservative faith group in this study. In fact, 44 percent of ACSI parents fell into the evangelical category, compared to 10 percent of prospective parents and seven percent of the general population.

Prospective parents are more likely to attend a Catholic church than ACSI parents. ACSI parents are significantly more likely to attend (Protestant) church every week.

In addition, ACSI parents take advantage of multiple opportunities for their children to receive spiritual education. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of current ACSI parents have their children participate in Sunday School. In earlier grades (5th grade and under), ACSI students participate more than others in Vacation Bible School, Sunday School and family Bible reading.

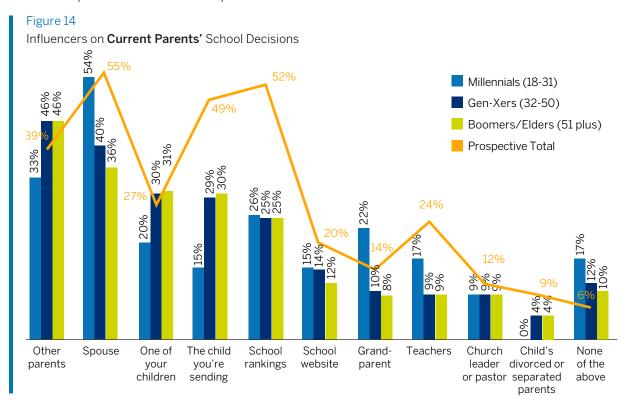
This is a remarkable observation about those parents who send their children to Christian schools. Many prospective parents interviewed in qualitative research contended that they do "other things" to provide spiritual education to their children. However, their participation in church-related programs is significantly lower than those parents who also invest in private Christian education for their kids. ACSI parents display a strong intentionality regarding the faith and character development of their children—a practice that past Barna research has revealed results in more lasting faith in the next generation.





Influences on School Choice

ACSI parents say that other parents and their spouse had the greatest influence on their choice of a Christian school for their child, but there is no one source sought by a majority of parents. Their children and the school's rankings were the next most important influences on ACSI parents' decisions.



Years ago, parents made the decision where their children would attend school, and stuck with that decision. They viewed their relationship with the school to be more covenantal than contractual, and they would resolve conflicts by working through them, rather than by switching schools. Regardless of how it was, many families do not operate that way anymore. They see school enrollment as a year-by-year (if not more frequent), child-by-child decision that they evaluate continually in order to determine whether the value proposition, as they define it, is still being met. This means Christian schools must constantly be communicating the value of the school and its impact in the lives of its students, through stories, happenings, achievements, and how it is performing relative to its metrics. School leaders should assume parents are always looking around, no matter how much they love the school. In some ways, this is good. Parents should be actively engaged in ensuring their children are receiving the best education possible, and schools should be 'on their game' to ensure they are doing what they can, by God's grace, to provide it.

Quite often, people are not aware of all the factors in their decision-making process. For example, people value something much more highly when they think of it as being theirs, a behavior called the Endowment Effect.⁷ This may explain some of the enthusiasm of parents whose children currently attend ACSI schools.

In addition, sometimes people recognize that they do not know the source of their opinions: six percent of prospective parents and 12 percent of current parents say they do not know what influenced their school choice.

In addition to their own school experiences, which a majority of parents say influence their decisions for their children, parents answered questions about the influence of school rankings, their own parents (the students' grandparents), church leaders, school websites and more.

Majorities of prospective parents said that their spouse (55%) and school rankings (52%) influenced them most. A somewhat smaller group cite their child (49%—more common for older students) and other parents (39%).

As we described earlier, pastors and church leaders avoid trying to influence parents when it comes to school choice. In line with that, relatively few parents (9 percent of current parents and 12 percent of prospective parents) say a pastor influenced their school choice. However, Millennial prospective parents are more likely to be influenced by a church leader or pastor than other generations (21% versus 12%).



⁷ Carmon, Ziv; Ariely, Dan (2000). "Focusing on the Forgone: How Value Can Appear So Different to Buyers and Sellers". Journal of Consumer Research. 27 (3): 360–370. doi:10.1086/317590.

Child's Input

Children play a role in selecting a school, but they do not seem to have the final say in many families. For ACSI families, 27 percent of families make a decision without being influenced by their child's opinion of specific aspects of the school. However, another 28 percent of current parents say their child strongly influenced their choice of school. So, while children's opinions are heard in most current families, they are not deciding factors in many.

This is true of all current families when it comes to subjective aspects of education, such as safety and friendships. For the older children of ACSI families, athletics are also an area where children's opinions are heard.

Children's opinions on schooling seem to be even more frequently included in prospective families, where 49 percent say that their child strongly influenced their choice of school and only four percent say their child's opinion will not be an important consideration in any topic.

Sixty-eight percent of prospective parents say that their kids are a big influence in the matter of safety—possibly because it is subjective to some extent and possibly because the child has a better understanding of bullying and other threats.

A similar majority (62%) of prospective parents include their child's opinion on future opportunities when choosing a school. This number does not vary much by the child's grade level or any other family characteristics. It could simply mean that prospective families take their children's ambitions seriously from early childhood, allowing them to guide school choices.

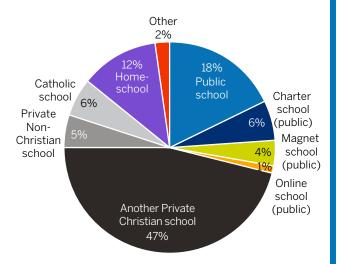
Given these results, it's unlikely that appealing more to children will tip the balance in favor of an ACSI school, except perhaps in convincing both children and parents that the school is one where the child would be safe and would be empowered to pursue their ideal future.

Anecdotally, most school heads probably recognize that older students have quite a bit of say in many of today's families' decisions as to where those students attend school. This survey demonstrates that it is even more prevalent with prospective families than current ones. There may also be a minimizing effect in this survey, by which parents are underreporting the impact their older children have on where they attend school, because they suspect perhaps it ought not be this way. Schools have seen some success in marketing to students, as well as adults, through social media, preview days, campus crossover days focusing on retention, and the like. While such marketing efforts should not be a substitute for appealing to parents, schools would be wise to consider both older students and parents in their marketing efforts.

Figure 15 Percentages of Parents Who Say Child Had Great Influence on School Choice 54% 48% 46% 29% 30% 15% Current Prospective Current Prospective Current Prospective Millennial Millennial GenX GenX Boomers/Elder Boomers/Elder parents parents parents parents parents parents

ACSI PARENTS ARE VERY SATISFIED
WITH THEIR CURRENT SCHOOL AND
WITH PRIVATE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS
MORE BROADLY. HOWEVER, THEY
ARE GENERALLY AWARE OF THE
OTHER SCHOOLS IN THEIR AREA AND
WOULD CONSIDER OTHER SCHOOL
TYPES FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

Figure 16
Current Parents' Second-Choice School Types



Market Prospects

ACSI Parents' Loyalty to Current Schools

Current ACSI parents are very satisfied with their current school and with private Christian schools more broadly. However, they are generally aware of the other schools in their area and would consider other school types for their children.

ACSI parents say their schools are distinctive in most of the attributes they personally value. Current parents give consistently high ratings to their schools for most characteristics, and they give their schools the highest ratings across any school choice alternatives in their area (public, private, religious and homeschool).

Ninety-one percent of ACSI parents rate their school an eight, nine or 10 out of 10. When asked to think hypothetically where they would want to send their child if their current school were no longer an option, 47 percent chose another private Christian school, as shown in [Figure 16].

Additionally, 43 percent of ACSI parents rated private non-Christian schools an 8, 9 or 10 out of 10 points. This suggests that private education may be a primary attraction for current parents.

Other options are not off the table, however. Even with such high rankings for their current schools, most of these parents would consider options other than ACSI schools for their child.

At the beginning of the survey, before they rated any schools, parents were asked what school types they would be willing to consider for their child(ren) (which determined if they qualified as a prospective parent for this survey). When asked in general what types of schools they would be open to for their children, the majority of current parents (54%) would be willing to send their child to a non-Christian private school. ACSI parents who are Catholic are more open to non-Christian private schools at 76 percent. Unsurprisingly, 94 percent of Catholic ACSI parents would send their children to a Catholic school, although only 36 percent of ACSI parents overall would consider a Catholic school.

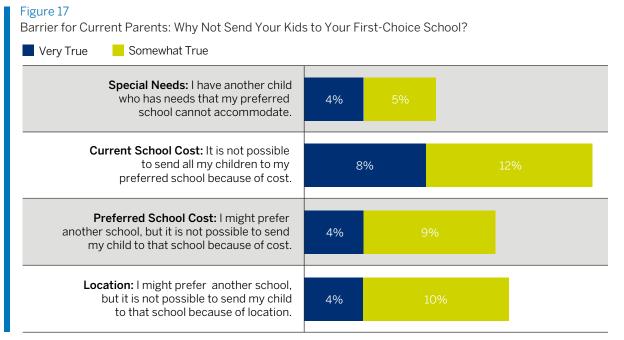
Fifty-two percent would consider a public school (and 20 percent of these—even more in urban areas—have had a child in public school). Fifty-nine percent would consider a charter school; 55 percent would consider a magnet school; nearly half (49%) would consider homeschooling their children.

The fewest parents would consider online schooling for their child, but that number increases as children enter high school. Online schooling might seem more plausible for children in high school, who could be more independent from parents.

The type of alternative school ACSI parents would consider varies by region. The South leans toward magnet schools and less toward online schools, and the Northeast leans more toward Catholic schools. ACSI parents in the Midwest and West have a little more interest in homeschooling than parents in other regions.

Barriers

To get an idea of barriers to ACSI schools, the survey asked parents if there is anything preventing them from sending all their children to their current ACSI school. As shown in [Figure 17], a minority report any challenges.

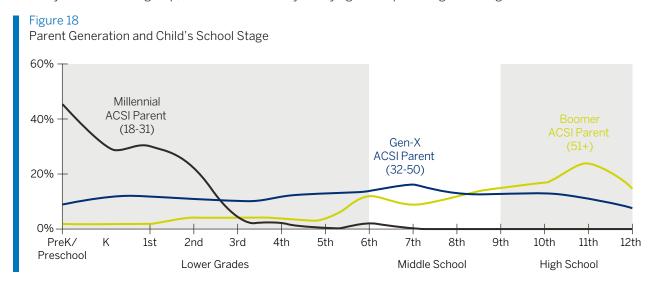


Tuition and fees are the most common barrier to sending their children to their preferred school; location is also a challenge. Less than 10 percent of current parents cite their child's special needs as a barrier.

Millennials and Their Distinctive Preferences

The education market is changing. As Millennials, the largest American generation, start families and face decisions about schooling, they will affect the priorities, background and faith of ACSI's future student population.

The impact of the Millennial generation's preferences is only beginning to be felt in schools. As of the time data collection for this study, this generation was 18–31 years old, while the average American has a first child at about age 26. Millennials have a higher number of bachelor's degrees, which tends to delay having children; one-third of current mothers with bachelor's degrees had their first children at age 35 or older. Put all these statistics together and they show that as a group, Millennials have not yet fully aged into parenting school-aged children.



It is still uncertain what Millennials' family structure will be like. So far, the majority of their children have been born to unmarried parents⁸, but children born within marriages will likely become the majority over time.

The newer generations are much more likely to be non-white and multiracial and to have multiracial children. Seven percent of babies born in 2009 (most of whom were ready for school in 2016) are multiracial, up two percentage points from the previous census⁹. In 2013, multiracial babies were 10 percent of the births, indicating an increasing trend.¹⁰

⁸ http://www.wsj.com/articles/coming-soon-millennials-married-with-children-1439371801

⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/number-of-biracial-babies-soars-over-past-decade/2012/04/25/glQAWRiAiT_story.html

¹⁰ http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/#the-size-of-the-multiracial-population

Most importantly to ACSI schools, the faith profile of Millennials looks increasingly different from previous generations. The overall population of Christians is shrinking, while those with no religious affiliation is growing—currently 33 percent of Millennials, compared with 14 percent of Baby Boomers. However, the more theologically conservative evangelical group is not shrinking as quickly as notional Christians. With the broader culture moving further away from Judeo-Christian values, there is no longer societal pressure to be "churched," so Millennials on the whole are less compelled to affiliate with Christianity on a superficial level.

These characteristics of the Millennial generation have quite a few possible results. One way they may affect ACSI schools is that the Millennials who choose ACSI schools may be very much like the group of current parents. In that case, future Millennial parents will be a smaller percentage of the prospective market (as Millennial parents are less likely to fit the faith and demographic profiles of Gen-X and Boomer parents). If this is the case, then the population ACSI serves will increasingly be a niche group.



On the other hand, if future ACSI parents are more representative of Millennials and of trends in American parenthood, then they will be older than past generations at each stage of their children's education. They may have less disposable income, often due to their own college debt. Additionally, they will be significantly more ethnically diverse.

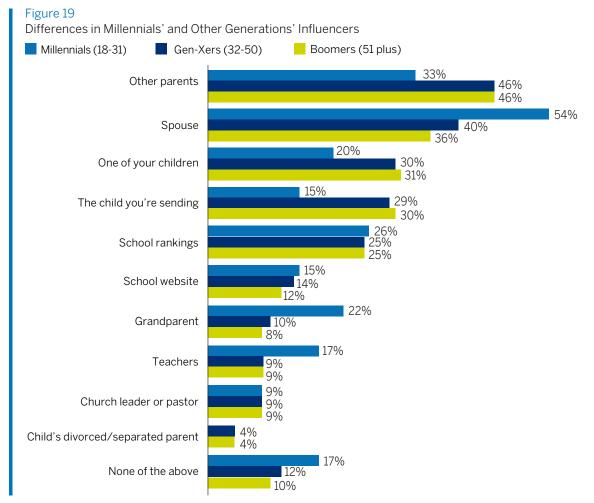
The Millennials who currently send their children to a Christian school feel strongly enough to make a significant investment in their children's spiritual development despite having significantly lower household income than the average current parent (two-thirds earn less than \$75,000, compared with only one-third of Gen-X current parents in this income bracket). For now, there is a solid core of theologically conservative, active-in-their-faith Millennials who, in this research, display even deeper convictions about Christian education than the broader current parent population. However, as more Millennial families enter Christian schools, they may grow in one of the two directions described above.

So far, it looks like they will be enthusiastic and principled, seeking and accepting the influence of their parents and spiritual leaders and looking for schools that would teach their sons and daughters the same lessons they may have received at home.

While they are not yet a large enough group of parents to profile with certainty, Millennials are showing some distinctive patterns in how they choose schools for their children. When they responded to the survey about school choice, few Millennials had children who were past second grade, so the information below is really about how Millennial parents of children under eight think about schooling.

In terms of priorities, the Millennials surveyed put the highest value on a school that aligned with their beliefs. This may reflect larger trends in society, or simply that much trust is required to hand a young child over to educators each day.

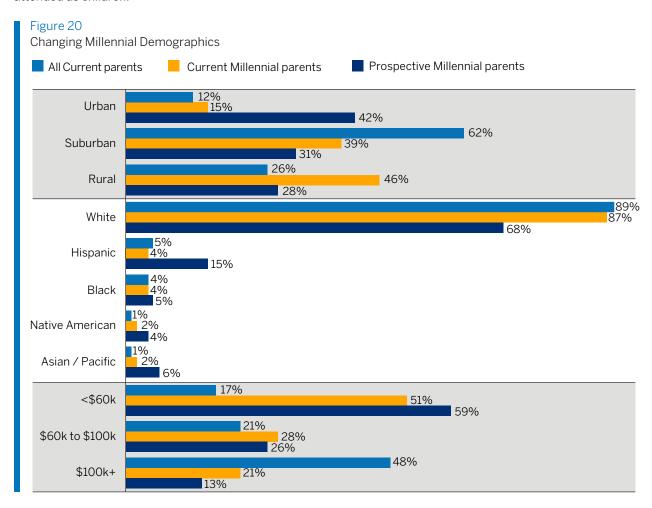
They are also more likely to be influenced by their parents (at a rate of 22%), the students' grandparents. This may be because this generation is less economically independent at this point in their lives than previous generations, and their parents may be helping the family to a significant extent. It may also be because their parents are younger and better able to take an active role in their grandchildren's schooling.



ACSI parents between 18 and 31 years old are more likely than other generations to choose homeschooling as a second-choice option if their current ACSI school were no longer available.

Millennials rate their ACSI schools highly. This group tends to be enthusiastic about their current school, giving higher scores than other generations for ACSI characteristics such as academics, peer influence, community involvement and convenient schedules for parents.

Millennial ACSI parents have more familiarity with various school types than other generations. As a group, their personal school experience is spread more broadly across school types. At the same time, they are somewhat less likely than other generations to say they will certainly send their child to the same type of school they attended as children.



MILLENNIAL PARENTS: PERILOUS PITFALLS AND POTENTIAL PROMISE

by Jay Ferguson, J.D., M.Ed., Headmaster Grace Community School ACSI Board Member

Millennials are an oft-feared, sometimes-maligned, emerging segment of our school family populations. While some concerns are simply cross-generational snobbery and anxiety toward the unknown, the research shows that this new parent group will inevitably challenge the way most Christian schools currently do business. For school leaders who prayerfully listen and adapt well, God will use the emerging parent generation to push agile institutions toward unprecedented levels of mission clarity and distinction.

Barna identifies Millennials as those currently 18 to 31, born between 1985 and 1999; the Pew Research Center notes they are currently the largest generation in the United States, with 75.4 million people, surpassing even Baby Boomers. The Millennial cohort continues to grow as young immigrants swell its ranks.¹

The United States as a whole is becoming less Christian, with Millennials leading the way. Practicing Christians—defined by Barna as self-identified Christians who say their faith is very important in their life and have attended a worship service within the past month—make up a shrinking slice of the overall population. In 2001, 45 percent of all U.S. adults qualified as practicing Christians. In 2017, just 34 percent meet the criteria. And among Millennials the proportion is even smaller: Just one in five is a practicing Christian (21%).

Millennials with a Christian background also have a high rate of church dropout. David Kinnaman notes that 59 percent spend at least some time during their young-adult years disconnected from church involvement, and 57 percent describe themselves as less religiously active today than when they were 15 years old. Two-thirds of twentysomethings with a Christian background say they have gone through a season of serious doubt. A majority of young adults are "MIA from the pews and from active commitment to Christ during their 20s.2" While in past generations people tended to move back to faith practice as they aged and had children of their own, Kinnaman and others note this longstanding trend has been disrupted in the past decade or longer.3

Most of us are aware of these trends; we may have seen them at work in our own schools. They are a source of concern, and a main reason Barna researchers suggest in this report that parents choosing Christian school for their children could become increasingly exceptional as Millennials' children come of school age. However, God is continually faithful to bring up his people in the next generation, and reviewing this study also gives cause for encouragement and indicates opportunities among this new group of school parents.

While the overall number of Christians in the U.S. is shrinking, one group has held steady for more than two decades at 7 percent of the population: evangelicals. Among Millennials, this group of theological conservatives remains robust in comparison to more notional (cultural) Christians. Although a larger percentage of Millennials is religiously unaffiliated relative to older generations, about one-third of young self-identified Christians remain deeply passionate for Christ, committed and ready to engage the world for the gospel.⁴ These young adults, often more than older believers, set a premium on deep faith.

Millennial Christian parents, smaller in number but more robust in faith, offer great promise to Christian schools.

Furthermore, Millennials—whether Christian or not—are more likely to have Christian schooling in their educational background, together with other types of formal education. As many as two in five children in a single classroom have at least one parent who attended Christian school. For the majority for whom the experience was positive, it is likely to influence their decisions on behalf of their children toward Christian education. Barna researchers indicate that personal education experience matters to parent decision-making, and that parents tend to choose an educational experience for their children that mirrors their own experience. This tendency is strongest among Millennials, with 81 percent choosing schooling similar to what they received.

Parents are more likely to choose a Christian school if such schooling is in their background, a situation that is more common among Millennials than any other generation. And while fewer Millennials identify as Christian, those who do describe their faith and values as the most important factor when it comes to the schools they choose for their children. These findings, alongside the younger generation's expressed desire for authentic biblical community, create tremendous opportunities for Christian schools.

Other trends among Millennials have potential to impact how Christian schools operate:

- 1. Millennials are more ethnically diverse than older generations. Four in 10 have racially mixed marriages, for example,⁵ and young immigrants are constantly being added to the youngest generation of adults.
- 2. In their current life stage, Millennials tend to have lower household income than older Americans, averaging \$75,000 per year for current ACSI families and \$60,000 or less for prospective families.
- Millennials are more likely than older adults to be influenced by their own parents and by their pastors when it comes to their children's education.
- **4.** Millennials are more likely than older parents to consider homeschooling as an option.
- 5. With multiple types of schooling in their backgrounds, Millennials are more familiar with a broad set of schooling options compared to older generations. They are more school savvy and open to options other than Christian education for their children, whether they are current Christian-school parents or prospective parents.

Millennials are only now coming of age as school parents. Children of the oldest Millennials are young in their elementary careers. It is therefore too early to predict how these parents' perceptions and faith journeys will change as they age and gain experience. It is likewise premature to determine how best to respond to the impact of the Millennial generation on our schools. Given those caveats, some measures can be taken now and are good school practice regardless of parents' generation.

First, Christian school leaders should maintain and promote a deep commitment to the Christ-centeredness of their school's mission. Millennials who will be attracted to our schools are, for the most part, those who think and feel deeply about their faith, and

who seek a school that shares their values. Educators must consider the aspects of the gospel that are most important to Millennial parents—and indeed, to all of us: How can faith in Christ shape our entire worldview, how we understand reality? How do we actively engage a culture that is no longer Judeo-Christian, that views Christians, our core beliefs and our sexual ethics as quirky at best, dangerous at worst? How do we cultivate lovers of Christ in our schools through redemptive community and authentic worship? How can we build the Church's future by equipping our young people with a strong ecclesiology, a right understanding of the Church's role in history and of their role in the Church? Our educators need God's wisdom to answer these and other questions as we prepare Millennials' children to engage the world.

Second, schools must provide not only superlative Christian formation, but also excellent academics and co-curricular activities. Millennial parents are "school smart"; many have personal experience with a number of alternatives. A significant percentage sees school enrollment as a "year-by-year, child-by-child" decision, rather than a matter of brand loyalty. Thus, the impetus is on our schools to articulate and communicate our value proposition to prospective and current parents. Hiring the best teachers and coaches, aligning our curriculum, using reliable assessments to improve instruction and tracking student performance throughout their course of study are best practices, school survival tactics and, first and foremost, an act of worship to our Lord and Savior, who is worthy of our best.

Third, schools need a concerted effort to build and maintain diversity within the school body. Now more than ever, the school community should more closely resemble the whole body of Christ, especially given the growing racial diversity of Millennial families. This commitment should include, among other initiatives, developing a theology of diversity and unity; fostering a cross-culturally welcoming environment; seeding

diversity proposals with school funding; providing cultural, academic and economic "on ramping" opportunities for culturally diverse families; and becoming involved in the school choice movement within one's state.

Fourth, schools need to emphasize affordability. Millennial family income, at least for now, is lower than that of older generations. But this means there are tremendous opportunities for schools that are creative in their funding models, through third income sources, fundraising, school-choice initiatives, congregational funding and other mechanisms. Taking Barna's findings into account, a good guiding question might be, *What must we do so that a family with a combined income of* \$60,000 to \$75,000 can afford us?

Fifth, given the greater tendency of Millennials to choose homeschooling, schools need to develop strategies for partnering with these families in order to advance long-term sustainability. Barna says such opportunities are most common in high school, when parents feel less competent to guide all aspects of their child's education. Partnering could include limited course menus, university-type schedules for homeschool students (with commensurate pricing structures), online offerings and access to co-curricular activities when possible, given interscholastic league regulations and the need for equity for full-time students.

Finally, schools should focus on sustaining relationships with alumni parents and other alumni. We should also seek to educate local pastors about the value of Christian education, making sure they are aware of research that show Christian school graduates are more likely than others to engage in church attendance, giving and other healthy practices that make for good church membership.⁶ With Millennials looking to their parents and pastors for guidance on their education decisions, Christian schools should develop these local relationships and cultivate potential referral sources.

Change is almost always difficult, so it's not surprising that some school leaders view the new parent generation with trepidation. I've met more than one school head who believes now is the time to "get out of the business." Yet I also remember a time when my own generation, the one currently building and sustaining Christian schools, was viewed as a bunch of nihilists who stood for nothing. Christian institutions, it was said, would collapse under the weight of parachute pants and techno, or flannel shirts and grunge guitars.

And yet here we are. God is on his throne and Christian education lives. Would it be such a bad thing for God to use the challenge of this next parent generation to make us more academically, culturally and economically diverse; more thoughtful about what it will take to bring the gospel to the next generation; more affordable; more academically and programmatically excellent; and more mission-centered?

Bring on the Millennials, and let's get busy.

- Richard Fry, "Millennials Overtake Baby Boomers as America's Largest Generation," Pew Research Center Fact Tank, April 25, 2016. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/ millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/ (accessed January 2017).
- 2. David Kinnaman, You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), p. 25.
- Kinnaman, You Lost Me; see also David Masci, "Why Millennials
 Are Less Religious than Older Americans," Pew Research Center
 Fact Tank, January 8, 2016. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact tank/2016/01/08/qa-why-millennials-are-less-religious-than older-americans/
- 4. Kinnaman, You Lost Me, p. 27.
- "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research
 Center, May 12, 2015. www.pewforum.org/2015/5/12/americaschanging-religious-landscape (accessed January 2017).
- "The Lasting Effects of Your School," Christianity Today, Aug. 29, 2011. http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/september/ spot-lastingschool.html (accessed January 2017). See also Cardus Education's "Guide for Parents and Supporters of Christian Schools." www.cardus.ca/research/education/survey_ schedule (accessed January 2017).

Homeschoolers: a Market with Complementary Education Needs?

Homeschoolers' needs only somewhat overlap with what ACSI schools provide. Since homeschool families share many of the characteristics of ACSI parents—mostly ethnically white Protestant Gen-Xers with higher-than-average incomes—Barna looked into their education needs.

In fact, there are some demographic differences between homeschoolers and current ACSI families. Homeschooling parents are on average younger. They are more likely to live in urban areas and the West and less likely to live in suburban areas and the South. Although wealthy relative to Americans in general, they are less wealthy than ACSI parents.

But when it comes to what ACSI schools have in common with homeschooling families, the faith profile will be more important than demographic similarity. The homeschool group's faith profile shows more non-practicing and more notional Christians, as well as more people who say they have no religion. That is to say, these two groups of families are not a perfect match. Nevertheless, within the group of homeschoolers, there are many families who do share the same faith and values as current ACSI families.

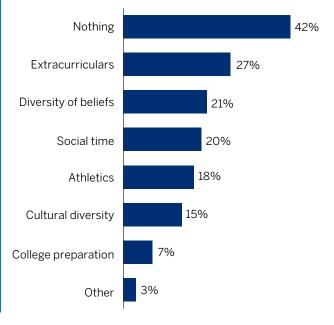
Homeschooling parents do not believe that their children are missing out on much; 42 percent say they are missing nothing at all, 27 percent say they are missing out on extracurricular activities; and more than 20 percent say their kids are missing out on the benefits of diversity.

Given how satisfied ACSI parents are with their schools' extracurricular offerings, this may be an area where homeschoolers' needs and ACSI schools' strengths match.

The most often-cited reasons for switching to homeschooling suggest that parents are primarily looking for better academics and more control over their child's education. Other reasons for homeschooling include avoiding bad influences—whether from students or teachers.

Opportunities to coordinate with homeschool families are mostly in high school, where parents feel underqualified and value many of the attributes private Christian schools provide. In particular, foreign languages, the arts and some STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) subjects are areas of opportunity, as are sports and extracurricular activities.

Figure 21 Homeschool Parents' Views on What Their Children are Missing Out On



Conclusion

Tipping the Balance for Prospective Parents

The greatest competitor to private Christian school, for prospective parents, is either a traditional public school or a private non-Christian school. If for some reason there is a barrier to the ACSI schools, these other two school types are the next likely choice.

Given how favorably disposed prospective families are toward ACSI schools, some barriers keep them from choosing the schools from year to year. Cost, location and being satisfied with different, non-Christian school types all pose barriers—to more than double the amount of prospective parents than current parents.

The biggest barrier—even to current ACSI families—is the cost. If cost were not a factor, prospective parents say they would select private Christian schools as their top choice among all other types of school. Religious schools—Catholic and ACSI together—attract more than half of prospective parents. However, for most families, the cost of private schooling cannot be ignored.

Given this difficulty, charter and magnet schools could become strong competitors, since prospective families perceive them to be affordable and academically excellent. If awareness and availability of these schools increases, prospective families may find they are the best fit for their priorities.

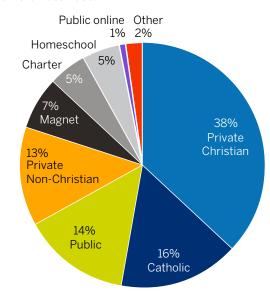


Other areas that are high priorities but receive relatively low ratings from prospective parents include up-to-date facilities, modern technology and convenient location.

Alone, each characteristic may not be enough to tip the balance for prospective parents. But together, a more positive view of ACSI schools' convenience and facilities may change some families' minds.

One thing that families would likely miss out on is spiritual development and character education. In theory, prospective families could bring their children to church and other ministries for these benefits, but as we saw earlier, families with a child in an ACSI school are more likely to also send their child to Bible studies, youth group and other activities.

Figure 22
Prospective Parents' Preferred Schools, if Cost Were Not a Factor





METHODOLOGY...

METHODOLOGY

A sample of ACSI schools invited parents to participate in these surveys. To qualify, parents had to have a decision-making role in their children's education and to have at least one child enrolled in an ACSI school.

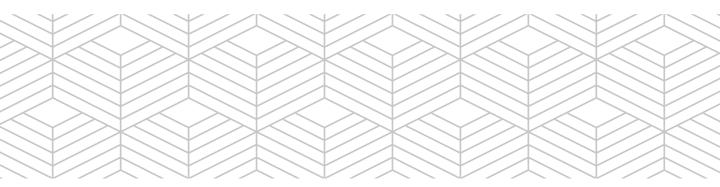
The prospective parent survey went to a nationally representative group of people who had children in grades K–11 (those with seniors in high school and no other children were not included). To be counted in the survey, they had to indicate that they would be open to sending their child to a private Christian school. There was no restriction on the religion of these parents.

While this survey was offered to a nationally representative group, the group that met the qualifications was also different from an average collection of American parents. The confidence interval for this survey is 90 percent.

Homeschool and online schooling parents received invitations to take Barna's survey through homeschool networks and through an online panel. Like the prospective parents, these parents had to have a school-aged child, to be a decision-maker for that child's schooling and to be open to the idea of sending their child to a private Christian school. The confidence interval for this survey is 90 percent.

Finally, to understand the role of ministers in influencing parents about school choices, Barna surveyed 456 Protestant pastors and 27 Catholic pastors through Barna's Pastor Panel.

Within each of the groups surveyed, Barna was able to identify subgroups through questions about the individuals' faith and ages. Generational groups included Millennials, Generation X, Boomers and Elders. Faith groups included evangelical, non-evangelical born again, notional Christians, non-Christian faiths and no religion. These groups overlap with the denominational categories (Mainline and non-Mainline) of churches they may belong to—but these categories are most important for church leaders (page 8).



ABOUT...

ABOUT ACSI

The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) is the largest Protestant educational organization in the world. Since 1978, ACSI has advanced excellence in Christian schools by enhancing the professional and personal development of Christian educators and providing support functions for Christian schools. Those functions include teacher and administrator certification, school accreditation, professional development, legal/legislative support, and textbook publishing.

ACSI member schools serve more than 5.5 million students worldwide. Along with a headquarters facility, ACSI has 25 offices in North America and around the globe. Nearly 24,000* schools from over 100 countries are members of the association.

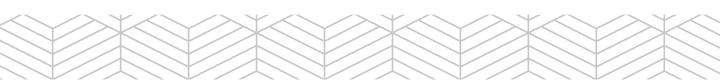
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*Includes 19,000 associate members in the Democratic Republic of Congo

ABOUT BARNA

Barna Group is a research firm dedicated to providing actionable insights on faith and culture, with a particular focus on the Christian church. In its 32-year history, Barna Group has conducted more than one million interviews in the course of hundreds of studies, and has become a go-to source for organizations that want to better understand a complex and changing world from a faith perspective. Barna's clients include a broad range of academic institutions, churches, non-profits and businesses, such as Alpha, the Templeton Foundation, Pepperdine University, Fuller Seminary, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the MacIellan Foundation, DreamWorks Animation, Focus Features, Habitat for Humanity, the Navigators, NBC-Universal, the ONE Campaign, Paramount Pictures, the Salvation Army, Walden Media, Sony and World Vision. The firm's studies are frequently quoted by major media outlets such as The Economist, BBC, CNN, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, Fox News, Huffington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times.

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