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# Good Things Come in Small Classrooms

## *The Value of Adventist Education*

Those who spend time in an Adventist elementary or high school quickly realize that Adventist schools promote an approach to learning different than most. Now, the rest of the nation is starting to take note.

A study recently published by Elissa Kido of La Sierra University and **Jerome Thayer** of Andrews University indicates that Seventh-



day Adventist students of all demographics are performing above the national average in all subjects. Not only are their achievement scores increasing, but their ability scores increase as well. Even students who

enter Seventh-day Adventist schools part of the way through experience this increase in ability. As education and the achievement gap become more and more prominent concerns in America, the Adventist advantage is gaining prominence as a viable model for education reform.

The results come from the CognitiveGenesis study, a four-year review begun in 2006 with the intent to improve learning and enrollment in Adventist schools. The research team at La Sierra ran a pilot study the first year,



and once the results from that study came in, Thayer joined the team as the statistician. Prior to the CognitiveGenesis study, schools across the North America Division of Seventh-day Adventists “had been giving forms of standardized achievement tests, and some were giving ability tests, but it wasn’t standardized across the board,” says Thayer.

So the researchers administered a set of nationally standardized achievement and ability tests like the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and Cognitive Abilities Test (ITBS) to over 50,000 students in Adventist schools in the United States, Canada, and Bermuda. In addition, they gave surveys to the students, parents, teachers, and administrators for three years, asking questions about lifestyle, learning style, and educational practices in the schools.

The early results indicated an encouraging result: Adventist students scored above the national average on standardized tests, but they also showed an above average growth in ability to problem-solve and think critically—and their ability increased the longer they spent in Adventist schools. “We didn’t anticipate this drastic increase in ability; it kind of surprised us,” says Thayer.

Traditionally, small, one- or two-teacher schools like many Adventist elementary schools have been seen as too small to foster good learning. But the CognitiveGenesis study found that students in multi-grade classroom and small enrollment Adventist schools were as high or higher in achievement compared to students of similar ability in larger Adventist schools and to all students nationally. Whereas many parents and educators may question the effectiveness of a faith-based science curriculum that may not have the latest science equipment, Thayer and his colleagues discovered that Adventist students scored much higher than the national average in science as well. Moreover, the students aren’t learning just technical knowledge—science reasoning was the area of science where they scored the highest.

Regardless of the school size or budget, students in Adventist schools across the country are experiencing an increase in knowledge and ability. This phenomenon, largely due to the curriculum and Adventist principles of education, is leading researchers—and the rest of the nation—to believe the “Adventist approach” might just be the key to better schools.



The preliminary results of this study first appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor* in November 2010. Several days later, the *Los Angeles Times* picked up the story.

The *Christian Science Monitor*: “In each subject category, students attending Adventist schools scored higher than the national average. They also scored higher than their expected achievement based on assessment of individual ability—a factor few other schools measure.

One of our most dramatic findings is that students who transferred to Adventist schools saw a marked improvement in academic achievement. The more years a student attended an Adventist school, the more his or her performance improved.

A skeptic might argue that private schools such as those run by the Adventists are made up primarily of wealthy, white, upper-middle-class students, hence the reason for higher achievement. Not so.

Our research shows the demographics of Adventist schools are closer to those of public schools, with high economic and socioeconomic diversity. Enrollment is open, meaning students are admitted without the kind of screening for ability that many other private schools employ. In North America, the Adventist Church runs almost 1,000 schools, many of which are small and rural. We found no relationship between the size of the school that students attended and achievement.”<sup>1</sup>

An opinion editorial from the *Los Angeles Times*: Another option in the pursuit of education reform is “taking a cue from the Adventists,” writes Elissa Kido in an opinion piece for the *Christian Science Monitor*. In her independently financed study, the professor of education at Seventh-Day Adventist college La Sierra University, found “that students at Adventist schools outperformed their peers at the national average in every subject area” regardless of socioeconomic status. Why? Because Adventists specialize in holistic learning, engaging their students’ mind, body and spirit for achievement.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Elissa Kido, “For real education reform, take a cue from the Adventists.” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 15, 2010.

2 Alexandra Le Tellier, “The Conversation: Pursuing successful education reform might mean going the way of the Adventists.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 2010.