

What is Rivendell's End of the Bargain? Another Angle on Educational Excellence

In a perfect world, Rivendell School would graduate Christ-centered students who read with full understanding, think critically with discernment, write clearly with insight, calculate mathematics with accuracy, create powerful works of the imagination, and serve others wholeheartedly. This ideal package of education would be wrapped up and secured with a life-long love of learning. In reality, of course, that is all rather utopian, and for any school to promise the above qualities would border on the naive, if not dishonest. I suggest we drop all our "feel-good" statements and be real. The truth is we live in an imperfect world, waiting for full redemption, when at last we will know as we are known, and will see God face-to-face.

The question before our school, any school, is, what do we do in the meantime? How do we aim realistically for wholeness in a broken world, holding standards high while at the same time recognizing the human condition?

The short answer, I believe, is God's grace and community teamwork. And now for the longer answer. Just as no fallen individual will hold up well under a microscope, neither will any home, church, or school. Clearly then, the more powerful microscopes now placed on parents, pastors and teachers do not help us with educational excellence. The secret is: we need each other, we need a partnership for each student to grow with integrity.

I propose that this partnership has two senior partners and one junior partner. Parents, serving as the primary and most influential pastors and teachers in their child's life, are one of the senior partners. That's why Jesus taught the parents and blessed the children, rather than the other way around. The parent is the child's first teacher. The other senior partner is the student, the one who comes to the table with the ultimate trump card: motivation, effort and natural ability. I wonder if school, then, is actually the junior partner in this arrangement. For at the end of the day, when the parent is taking the ultimate responsibility and the young student is cooperating, the school can accomplish great things. If not, the school is limited in its effectiveness.

I hope this doesn't come across as avoidance of the school's responsibility. But the home really does have the final say in a child's learning experience – the home as defined by parents and child. And as the child grows through middle school into high school, he assumes increasing amount of responsibility, until finally the older child is, if things go as planned, an independent learner, with full ownership of what is learned or forgotten, with what is achieved or ignored.

Well, if the parent and then the child take primary ownership of the child's education, where does that leave the school? What is a Christ-centered school obligated to do to hold up its end of the bargain? Rivendell wants neither to supplant the parent's role nor let the student off the hook. Instead, the school desires to support the dynamic duo of parent and child by providing to the best of its ability:

- ❖ a thematic, integral curriculum that aims to inspire, inform, and equip;
- ❖ nurturing, challenging teachers who love children and the life of the mind;
- ❖ a classroom atmosphere that seeks to engage and encourage each student;
- ❖ an accountable academic standard that encourages and monitors progress;
- ❖ a school environment that is safe, secure, and supportive of character development as well as academic progress and creative opportunity;

- ❖ a community of Christians who have volunteered together to pool a wide variety of personal gifts for the benefit of the children's educational experience;
- ❖ an on-going commitment to hold each other accountable and to bear each other's burdens through prayer, service, and loving relationships;
- ❖ an awareness to help each other make up the difference when one side of this partnership stumbles or falls;
- ❖ a communal celebration of both giftedness and interdependence, and rejection of both individualism and thoughtless conformity.

Since we cannot realistically promise perfection in our school, what we can do is guarantee that we will do our best. If we team rightly, we can help each other in our imperfection, in our wonderful ordinariness. In those areas where teachers are growing, we ask for the parents to help make up the difference and for the student to try that much harder. Wherever a student struggles, we will adjust and encourage to the best of our ability without dropping our pursuit of progress. If there are additional challenges needed for exceptional gifts, we ask for parent aid to help make that happen, as well as when support services are needed for special learning difficulties. Within the Rivendell community, humble servant-love can cover over a multitude of inevitable inadequacies.

Here's a thought on a student's thirst for knowledge and wisdom. It seems to me that both parents and teachers get too much blame when things go wrong, and too much credit when things go right. In other words, we can lead a student to the water, but we cannot make him drink. Since the student is human, there will be times when the student is not thirsty. So, between the home and the school, we will try to make him thirsty. We will do whatever it takes to salt his tongue: cajole, inspire, discipline, nurture, instruct, challenge, befriend. The end result of all this thirst inducement, though, is that we nonetheless cannot make him drink. The student has to cooperate. I often think that this fact is perhaps too often left out of the equation when we consider educational excellence. When all is said and done, Rivendell parents and teachers truly want to make a difference in each child's life. But we depend on the oft-forgotten senior partner in the mix, the student, to make that happen.

Finally, though, the fact is that a student is done a grave disservice if a school fails its part of the partnership. Tragically, schools have failed far too often. Failed how? I look at it this way. Uppermost in the doctor's written conscience, the Hippocratic Oath, is that the doctors should "first do no harm." Those same words should be at the threshold of each teacher's classroom as well. Do no harm by stifling a child's God-given creative impulse. Do no harm by snuffing out a child's natural joy of life and friendship. Do no harm by squelching that excited love of learning each child has from day one. Do no harm by dousing a child's inner fire to know. Do no harm by closing the world of wisdom by being stymied in a room of mere information. Do no harm by deadening the child's lively inspiration to explore and discover the nooks and crannies of God's great world. Do no harm by closing a child's windows to dream and wonder and play. First do no harm. That is how Rivendell can hold up its end of the bargain. We will do our best to partner responsibly, but we need the full partnership to do so. Let's get to work. With joy and a humble dependence on God's grace and truth.

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