How Do We Evaluate Student Learning?

February 25

Mountain City Christian School had just received the results of the statewide achievement tests written by fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students in November. Ken Heard posted a summary of the results on the bulletin board in the staff room. The results would be reported and briefly discussed in a staff meeting. Typically, staff room conversations have exhausted teacher interest before the meeting.

“So, Jim,” Linda said, “how did your students do last November? Does it they are still learning the basics?” She was worried that some of the new approaches in reading and writing were not preparing students adequately for future learning. She presented her own students with a carefully structured approach.

“At first glance, it looks like my students did quite well,” Jim replied. “Usually our students do very well on these tests. I believe they confirm quite nicely that we do a good job of overall teaching -- as well as of preparing our students for the tests. Our parents and school board certainly want us to continue to use the tests.”

Having overheard their conversation, Lynn looked for an opportunity to join in. She had recently completed her M.Ed. in evaluation, and hoped to encourage teachers to talk together more frequently about student learning, and especially about evaluating their learning. She felt the need for a review of Mountain City’s report card format and of the school’s student evaluation policy.

“What do you think these results really show about your students, Jim?” Lynn asked. “Do they tell you anything you didn’t already know from your own classroom evaluations?”

Linda jumped in before Jim could respond. “We know that these tests are a necessary and valuable exercise. They keep teachers on a proper schedule for teaching skills and let parents know that our school continues to emphasize the basics.”

Jim’s own response was more cautious. “To tell you the truth, Lynn, I don’t know if these tests tell us anything beyond what we know, but . . . .”

He paused as the bell rang and the conversation abruptly ended. Lynn mused to herself, “It happened again, just as we get into a good discussion about learning, the bell rings and recess or lunch is over and teachers have to go back to their classrooms. We really need to develop opportunities to discuss in more depth these issues that keep popping up for a few minutes here and there and then are left unresolved.”

As Jim went back to his classroom, Lynn’s question made him reflect on the discussions that had been held ten years ago, before Mountain City began to use achievement tests. Was it time to examine the impact that these tests were having? It seemed that assessment and accountability were becoming important issues again.

At noon Jim and Cal found themselves eating lunch at the same table in the staff room. They both shared an interest in teaching language across the curriculum and occasionally asked each other challenging questions. Today, Jim wanted to focus on the test results.

“Well, Cal, how did your eighth graders do on the test? Do the scores give you confidence that you’re doing a good job?”

“To be honest with you, Jim, I don’t even look at the scores anymore. As presently designed, the achievement tests only tell us that our students are above average compared to national norms. Is that supposed to mean that our students are better than others or is it just that we draw students from a particular socioeconomic background? I believe that these scores don’t help our teaching. We would be better off using the time that we now spend preparing for and taking the tests on better forms of evaluation. The only
feedback that parents and students receive from these tests is that the score is below average, average, or above average. Surely we can do better than that."

Jim was surprised at Cal's reaction. "I didn't know you felt so strongly about these tests."

"My problem with the tests is part of a larger issue. What are we really doing for our students if we continue to evaluate the way we are doing it now? I believe we need to sit down as a staff and talk about what we mean by our marking system. I know our report card for grades six to eight is different than yours. It's high time we reexamine how we evaluate students and how we communicate that to parents. I mean, what does a number or a letter tell you? How would you like to receive a grade for each unit you teach? Come to think of it, why do we give our students grades? Tell me, outside of school, in which occupation do adults get grades? Sure everyone gets evaluated, but who gets graded with a letter or a number?"

Jim's head was spinning. He certainly had not expected this reaction from Cal. He wondered what was behind it. Cal had developed some exciting units with his eighth graders. The students were enjoying writing in many different ways much more than before. It was true that at the beginning he had been criticized by some staff members and by some parents, but the criticism had decreased substantially as they saw how involved and interested the students were.

Pearl had been listening from the adjoining table, "Cal, you know that those tests don't mean very much to most of us. I wouldn't be too concerned if I were you. Achievement tests are here to stay. We do them because we have to. Parents want to know how their children compare statewide, so if these tests provide that comparison, why not have them?"

"I can understand why you feel this way," said Joan. "But we do need ways of assessing what our students know. The problem we face is that the tests are outdated. They need to be redesigned so that they test different levels of student thinking. Too many of the questions test recall and lower-order thinking skills. Apparently there are groups of people working on a new test design that will be piloted next year."

"A new test design? " Jim exclaimed. "Oh, that would be great! Just when we have figured out some good ways to prepare our students they change the test! I hardly think that will help any of us. Let's face it, changing the design of the test only means more headaches for teachers and more worries about how the test results will be used. Why don't we sit down and discuss whether or nor these tests really assist us in teaching and whether they really assist students in their learning? Let's come to grips with what evaluation should be like in Mountain City Christian School."

Jim's challenge was echoed by the end-of-lunch bell. Students filled the hallways. Classes would soon be starting again. Lynn had overheard most of the noon-hour discussion. She had wanted to join in with some of her own ideas but had decided to listen some more. It was important to let the teachers talk through some of these issues. Sometimes a comment by an administrator sounded too much like a statement of school policy and tended to close discussions rather than provide an atmosphere that stimulated discussion. Nevertheless, Lynn knew that she didn't have to wait any longer to decide her topic for the next staff in-service day. As Jim had said, Mountain City needed to discuss evaluation.

MARCH 1 STAFF MEMO
From: Ken, Lynn, Dennis, and Valerie
Re: April 14 In-service

In view of the energetic and involving discussions surrounding the achievement test results, we propose to have a full-day in-service to examine the way we evaluate and assess students at Mountain City Christian School. Lynn has volunteered to organize a workshop for that day. She welcomes your suggestions for ideas and issues regarding evaluation that you feel we should address on that day. Please share those ideas with her during the next two weeks.

As usual, we will have our lunch together as a staff on that day. Do we make reservations somewhere or are we going to have a potluck lunch here? Would the Social Committee please make the arrangements?

During the next two weeks, Lynn did receive several suggestions regarding issues to be included in the discussion.
Jim urged her to make sure that the staff address whether they should continue to use achievement tests. Cal met with her for a good half hour to convey his concerns about the real impact of grades. Joan stopped by to tell Lynn that something needed to be done in the way most teachers designed their own classroom tests. She insisted that the staff had to develop test questions that stimulated higher-level thinking skills. Margie caught Lynn during recess one morning to say that she hoped that the staff would get beyond the traditional evaluation issues and begin to address newer approaches to evaluation.

Lynn was pleasantly surprised at the number of suggestions she had received. As she began to consider the format she would use for the workshop, she had a feeling she wouldn't have to worry about doing all the talking on that day. She would present the staff with some principles to guide their thinking, set up small groups to discuss several issues, and conclude with the staff developing recommendations for initiating some improvements.

7:30 April 14

It was a cool, misty spring morning. As Lynn stepped out of the house she breathed in the freshness of budding trees and greening grass. Lynn appreciated the ten-minute walk in the crisp air each morning to get to school: it gave her a chance to run the day's activities through her head. Today, it seemed even more necessary since she would be leading a full day in-service.

On the other side of town, Glenn Prince headed out the door at about the same time. The fifteen-minute drive gave him enough time to worry about the strange ideas that might be suggested during the in-service. It seemed that whenever the staff was given an opportunity to talk things through, too many different ideas were presented. He was sure that today's session on evaluation would be no exception. Some teachers would propose that Mountain City should abolish grades and examinations; others would propose that the school should have a second category of marks that would indicate student effort. These teachers felt that an effort mark would give students and parents a clearer indication of the course grade. Oh, well, Glenn thought, a one day meeting won't lead to much change anyway, and, besides, the teachers would have a chance to express their ideas and then they could go on with their regular routines.

As Lynn reached the front door of the school, she took a deep breath. She felt confident in her preparation and in the support she would receive from several key staff members. She also knew that Ken Heard would have arranged to have beverages and pastries available all day and that the Social Committee had organized a special lunch through the Auxiliary.

"Good morning, Lynn! " Ken greeted her as she entered the foyer. "All set for the day?" He knew that she was but it was his usual genuine greeting for any staff member who had a special responsibility that day. It was his way of finding out if he needed to do anything else before the meeting started.

"Good morning, Ken! Yes, it looks like I'm all set. I hope most of the staff is ready too. You're opening the meeting, correct?" Lynn knew that he would do so with a sensitive and stimulating devotional. Ken welcomed everyone to the meeting by expressing his own appreciation for having a day to reflect on one of their tasks. He introduced the day's topic in relation to responsive discipleship. He read Romans 12 and shared a personal story about what the passage meant for him. In his prayer, Ken gave praise for the Lord's care over the school and asked for guiding wisdom during the day's discussions. He briefly reviewed the day's schedule and then introduced Lynn.

Lynn began her presentation with some personal reflections about the first eight months of the school year. She mentioned the active discussions that had occurred when the achievement test scores had been posted. They had reminded her of some of the seminar debates that had occurred during her year in graduate school; but the discussions at Mountain City had seemed much more realistic, rooted in teacher's own experiences and less "academic" than the ones at the university. She assured the staff that today's presentation and discussion would focus on their day-to-day practices and would also be intellectually stimulating. Lynn began her presentation with a few open-ended questions.

Why do we evaluate?

As teachers suggested responses, Lynn wrote them on a large sheet of paper. We evaluate:

to find out what students know

to discover if students need assistance
to tell parents how their children are doing
to determine a mark for the report card
to improve student learning
to report student standing
to the government to find out if students understood a particular unit
to give students an opportunity to indicate what they know
to determine if I reached my objectives as teacher
to give students feedback on what they know

How do we evaluate?
"Before we make a list, I would like us to take a few minutes to read a piece of writing by a seventh-grade student. Read the paragraph and think about how you would evaluate this student's work."

As the teachers read, a nervous quietness filled the room. For most of the teachers, marking was their least favored activity. Giving students a mark for the work they completed, or worse yet, a mark for work they had not completed, was a difficult job. For most of them, teacher education programs had emphasized classroom management and knowing their subject matter well. There was very little emphasis on evaluating students. Many of them remembered their first experiences with calculating marks. Some had benefited from the advice of experienced and sensitive colleagues; some had been appalled by the suggestion that the best way to calculate a report card mark was to consider all of the marks achieved during the term without looking at whose marks they were. Would some of these feelings and experiences emerge during the day?

"Let's share some of the ways in which we would evaluate this piece of writing."

John felt that this student has some good ideas about the topic, "However, he isn't able to express them very clearly."

Pearl, not unexpectedly, hoped that this didn't represent the way most of the grade seven students wrote.

"I had a difficult time evaluating this piece of work because I don't know the purpose of the original assignment," Susan said. "Why did the student write this? Is it a personal response to a discussion topic? Is it part of an essay assignment? I need to know that before I can say much more about what this student has written."

After a few more responses, Lynn felt that teachers were ready to consider some of the principles on which their evaluation should be based. She began by referring to the Bible passage that Ken had read for devotions. "If we want our students to be and become responsive disciples, to be able to discover and develop their gifts in service to the Lord, others, and creation in general, we need to evaluate in ways that enable students to do that. The following principles, adapted from Van Brummelen (1988), should be central to evaluation in a Christian school:

"First, evaluation must allow students and teachers to function as images of God, which means that they must be actively and responsibly involved in their own learning and hence in the evaluation of that learning. Teachers must make learning activities purposeful by sharing expectations with students and helping them to reflect on their own learning. Classroom evaluation should be primarily concerned with enabling learners to become more responsive in their learning.

"Second, evaluation must contribute to the development of knowledge, biblically understood. Because response is integral to knowing, an important aspect of evaluation becomes the appraisal of the ways in which students respond to and go beyond what has been taught. Because our knowledge is partial and tentative, evaluation ought to allow for open-ended and searching discussions rather than focusing primarily on short, definite answers. Because knowledge involves taking risks, evaluation encourages exploratory inquiries and considers what students are trying to do as well as assessing explicit answers. Because people come to know in many different ways, evaluation needs to go beyond assessing analytical development.

"Third, evaluation must contribute to the classroom covenant community, by affirming each student's involvement and contribution to the community. If evaluation is used primarily to rank students, then students tend to compete with each other for the sake of being better than their classmates. Evaluation must be done in a loving, upbuilding, and patient manner, accompanied by instruction that leads to further growth; students must sense that teachers are encouraging their learning and not judging their worth.

"Fourth, evaluation is a valuing activity. The ways in which teachers publicly recognize student accomplishments and failures will demonstrate to students what is really valued. In their evaluation of..."
students, teachers must show those factors in learning and knowledge that they consider important, that we value them for who they are as persons and that our appraisal of their learning is intended to help them develop their own gifts.

"Fifth, evaluation must communicate meaningful information to students and parents about student learning. Parents are vitally concerned about their children's progress and want to know how they are doing on a regular basis. Teachers must communicate in a variety of ways with parents so that they become aware of the interests of parents and parents become aware of the school's and the teacher's goals for learning."

Lynn concluded her presentation of basic principles by saying that teachers evaluate their students by affirming their worth as people, by recognizing their accomplishments, and by encouraging and challenging their efforts toward further development and growth.

It was 10:00 and time for a break. As teachers stood up to get some coffee, conversations quickly began. The staff had listened intently to Lynn's presentation: to talk about evaluation in this way was different from their usual focus, if they accepted these principles, their present methods of evaluation would obviously have to change.

While munching on a doughnut, Cal wandered over to where Jim and Glenn were engaged in an animated conversation about some of the things that Lynn had said. As he reached them he heard Glenn saying, "Of course we can’t do away with marks. Students won't do any work without marks. If I suggested to my students that from now on I wouldn't be putting a mark on their assignments but instead would only make comments about their work, many of them would immediately reduce their effort by half."

"You might be correct in saying that students would initially react that way," Jim responded, "However, I believe that is a result of what we have told them by the way we have evaluated them for so many years. They need to be weaned off marks and shown better ways to judge their own learning."

Cal was also interested. "Glenn, if we were honest, wouldn't we admit that the grades we give are not a very accurate representation of what our students know? Don't we grade primarily because we have to put a grade on the report card for parents and other authorities?"

Glenn disagreed with both of them. "Grades are necessary in school. They are a fairly accurate measurement of what students know about the material covered and, if done well, provide parents with a sense of where their children stand in relation to others in the class. Grades are a way . . ."

"It's time to get started again," Ken's booming voice could be heard above lively conversations and insistent voices. "Bring your beverage along."

In the room, Lynn was ready to explain the next part of the session. It was evident during the break that her presentation had stimulated discussion. She hoped that it would continue into the small group activity that had been planned.

"In order for each of us to be able to contribute our ideas and to ensure that our questions have been heard, we need to spend some time in small groups exploring some of our areas of concern. In February many of you expressed several concerns about the way we evaluate students at Mountain City. Three areas that stood out were the purpose of grades, the role of standardized tests, and the function and format of report cards. We will spend about thirty minutes in our groups for an initial discussion of one of the topics. Each group should first of all brainstorm ideas and questions on their topic concerning what we do now and what we could do in view of the basic principles that were outlined this morning. Secondly, each group should report back to the rest of us in the form of a proposal regarding what Mountain City should consider doing about this issue. These are the topics for the groups:

"Group One, the purpose of grades, will meet in Dennis's room, Group Two, the role of standardized tests, will meet in Susan's room. Group Three, the function and format of report cards, will meet in Jacqui's room.

"Please meet back here at 11:15 so that each group can present its proposal before lunch."

Each of the groups made their way to the designated rooms and were soon engaged in lively debate. Lynn had tried to make up the groups so that they represented some of the differences of opinion that existed on staff. She hoped that the principles she had presented might provide a way for the groups to develop some initial agreement about evaluation.
The Purpose of Grades

In Dennis's room, Joan, Cal, Glenn, and Dennis had not taken long to get embroiled in a debate about the pros and cons of grades.

"If we really practiced our belief that students are image bearers," Cal said, "then we would not grade students in the way that we presently do. We should be able to find a better way to evaluate their work. I believe that it is wrong to compare one student's intellectual ability with another student's ability."

Not surprisingly, Glenn disagreed. "I believe that marks can be used to communicate to parents what their children have achieved. Parents and students want to know how they measure up compared with others in their class, and more importantly, how they compare with other students their age at the end of high school."

"Do you really believe," Joan asked, "that a grade tells the parent or the student anything more than where they stand compared to others? I think that the strong emphasis on grades in our community and in our society is distracting us from the real purpose of learning. With our present focus on grades, we encourage students to work for the grade rather than working for understanding and wisdom. High marks have become the overriding goal. We try to emphasize service for God and others but so many students seem to see that as a tolerable add-on, and some even consider our service projects to be a distraction from their real goal for school. Dennis, what do you think?"

Dennis had been listening quite intently to the three of them arguing back and forth. He agreed with some of the arguments on both sides of the issue and hesitated to commit himself. Nevertheless, he knew that Mountain City had to come to grips with its grading practices. After a lot of heated discussion they had revised their K-4 report card five years ago. At that time the primary teachers had tried to involve the whole staff in a thorough discussion of evaluation, but the middle and high school teachers had balked at any change. Initially, a few parents had objected quite strongly, but as parents, teachers, and students became familiar with the new format the objections had changed to expressions of appreciation. Teachers had been given more time to prepare evaluations that provided a good deal of descriptive information about student achievement. What had seemed to be a major change at the time was now an accepted and expected part of student evaluation.

So Dennis was persuaded to comment. "In many ways our present practice of emphasizing grades that recognize intellectual achievement provide honor for those who have intellectual gifts. Parents, students, colleges, and universities, indeed our whole society gives high status to those who achieve the highest G.P.A. Celebrating the development of intellectual gifts is appropriate in a Christian school. But, what does such an emphasis on grades say to those who have different kinds of gifts? We say we believe that people have received different gifts, but in school, and in society, our practice shows that we give greater recognition to some gifts than others. If our school's task is to enable students to discover and develop all of their gifts, why do we continue to place so much emphasis on grading primarily intellectual gifts? Should we not be more distinctive?"

"Well," said Glenn, "I have to admit that your arguments sound quite good. However, the real world, which we are part of and our students have to live in, is a world of grades and classes. We must grade so that students are challenged in ways that will enable them to succeed out there. They shouldn't be sheltered from the real world."

"I don't believe that we intend to shelter our students," Joan reacted. "As a matter of fact, few employers actually grade their employees in the way that we grade our students. If we want to evaluate students realistically we should be evaluating them on the basis of what they themselves are able to do. That's quite different than giving them a grade that compares them to their classmates."

Just as Cal was about to push Joan's idea a little further, Lynn appeared at the door and indicated that they had five minutes to wrap up their discussion and come with their proposal to the larger staff.

Dennis took the initiative, "What shall we propose? Suggesting that we change our way of grading won't go over too well with many of us. We have developed routine practices that work for us and appear to work for most of our students. We would have to allow a good deal of time for discussion and time for teachers to reflect before any decision is made."
Joan suggested they propose that Mountain City examine its use of grades in terms of the principles that Lynn outlined. "It seems to me that they provide a good basis for stating the purposes of evaluation. We believe that people have a diversity of gifts. We are trying to provide more varied ways of recognizing those gifts. We need to find better ways of recognizing and evaluating student learning in response to the gifts that they have."

As they left Dennis's room to join the other teachers, Glenn couldn't help but wonder whether their proposal would last longer than today. He had seen and read many alternate ways of evaluating students, even at the high-school level. Yet in his heart he felt that whatever happened to the proposal, grades would continue to be at least a part of any school's system of evaluation.

**Standardized Tests**

In Susan's room the discussion about standardized achievement tests was just as spirited. Linda, Jim, John, and Susan had barely made it back from their break when John began: "It's high time that these tests recognize that some things have changed in school curriculum. You'd think that with all the literature out there about developing thinking skills the test makers would have improved test questions. They place too much emphasis on basic skills and lower order questions. Our students will never develop their thinking in the way they should. Also, there is reason to think that the tests may be gender-biased."

"Do you think that the tests will be improved?" Susan asked. "I believe that they will continue to test basic competencies. They're designed to serve the needs of a very broad population. It isn't likely that they will change much."

"We need to do more than hope that the tests will change," said Jim, "Look at how the test results influence how parents, administrators, and teachers feel about how our school is doing. It seems that the test results have become the yardstick by which we measure everything we do. The fact that our scores are generally at or above average is taken as an indication that what we are doing is worthwhile, and a confirmation of the quality of the education that our students are receiving. We take for granted that these tests measure what we consider to be the purpose of our school."

"Come on, Jim, we know that these tests don't measure everything that we consider important," Linda said. "None of us pretends to believe that the scores our students achieve represent all that they have learned or not learned."

"That's exactly the problem, Linda. We don't pretend to believe it. But take a look at our practices. Each of the teachers that teach students who will be writing these tests has files full of old test questions so that students can practice weeks in advance on a regular basis. I'll bet if you looked at the types of teacher-prepared tests for other parts of the curriculum you would see many questions that are similar to the questions on the achievement tests. We, and by that I mean parents, teachers, and students, perceive the test results to be important and I think they affect everything that we do."

"The charge of teaching to the tests is a serious one," John said. "I think that we try to do our best in assisting students to be reasonably well prepared. It could be that some of us are too zealous in our preparation. But if you consider how important the results are to many people in our society today, it doesn't surprise me that they are also considered to be important in our school. The real problem we face is the way in which we use the test results. We should educate ourselves and our parents regarding the purposes and limitations of different types of standardized tests. Some diagnostic tests can be used to provide information about particular levels of ability and skills so that we can design our program to meet those needs. Some tests can be used to diagnose strengths and weaknesses of specific subject areas in a school's curriculum. I would hope that we work toward evaluating students on the basis of school-established criteria and move away from using norm-referenced tests that compare students to each other. Standardized tests cannot and should not be the predominant measure of our programs."

Susan agreed, but she said the issue involved more than tests. "We have to carefully examine the ways we evaluate our students in our school. We need to come to grips with the fact that as teachers we haven't discussed what our goals for evaluation are. Each of us tries to evaluate our own students as fairly as possible. What messages do our students receive in the way we mark? Do they receive similar messages from different teachers? Are there contradictions in the way we mark?"
Just as Linda was about to respond, Lynn came into the room and said that they had four minutes to conclude their discussion and come with their proposal to the whole staff.

Linda was taken aback. "Do we actually have anything to propose to the staff? It appears to me that we haven't resolved our own differences yet."

"Let's try something like this," Jim suggested. "Let's propose that Mountain City take a look at its curriculum priorities and develop plans and processes for evaluation to fit with those priorities. While we are doing that we should clarify the purposes of the tests being used now and communicate those purposes to parents. We should explain the limitations of the tests and involve them in our discussions about better ways of evaluating student learning. Our discussions should include the negative consequences for student learning of an overemphasis on the results of these tests. Hopefully, we'll end up with an evaluation process that encourages students to show the things they are good at and discourages the current negative comparisons that occur on the basis of narrowly focused tests."

**Report Cards**

In Jacqui’s room the discussion was more subdued, although Geoff, Pearl, Ken, and Jacqui were able to focus on several key questions. Jacqui wanted to begin by showing the others the report card that was being used for K-4. Five years earlier she had been instrumental in leading the primary teachers to review the old format. They had successfully introduced a report card that described student learning by means of anecdotal comments, supported by examples to show what and how well students were doing in each area of study.

Initial opposition from some parents had mellowed as they experienced the more detailed description about their own children’s learning. The primary teachers had hailed that eventually the report cards in the higher grades would change as well. However, with the perceived need for greater accountability and more emphasis on student marks, ideas of review had died away. Before Jacqui could suggest that they look at the primary report card, Pearl tried to downplay a need for major change.

"Why don't we write a letter to accompany our present report card," Pearl said, "explaining what the grades mean and asking parents to put less emphasis on the grade when they talk with their kids about the report card?"

"I doubt if that would be enough, Pearl," Geoff replied. "The grade is a prominent feature and as far as most of our parents are concerned, the most important part. They look at the grade first and then at the class average. Many of my students tell me they are more concerned about being above or below the class average. I think it would be better if we eliminated the class average on the report card and added comments to explain the grade a student received."

Jacqui wanted to go even further. "How can you summarize all that a student has done into a grade? I don't see how one mark can adequately indicate to parents what a student knows or doesn't know, has done or hasn't done. I believe that it is important to use a number of different ways to describe student learning. By using anecdotal records, observation checklists, samples of student work, and conferences with students, we can provide a fuller description of learning than one grade will ever show."

"Report cards," said Ken, "are only one vehicle, even if they're the primary vehicle, that we use to communicate to parents how our students are doing. The report card is only an indication, a summary, of what the student has learned at a particular point in the year. We should not pretend that it tells the whole story."

"My students take home numerous papers and handouts that they have completed and I have marked," said Pearl. "If they would keep them together and show them to their parents more often everyone would have a much better idea of their grade on an ongoing basis. The report card grade simply represents an accumulated calculation that most students could do on their own. I'm always surprised when they say they didn't know that their grade was so low."

Jacqui agreed with the importance of gathering a sample of student work. "But what are we communicating to students and to parents when a mark, and maybe a brief comment, is the only thing on the report card?"
Ken knew the policy on this one. "Our report card explains our intent." He read from the form in front of him. "We believe that the true value of this report is realized when it is used to motivate your child to learn for the sake of learning and not just for the sake of the grade. Therefore be positive when you discuss this report with your child. Give praise for work well done and the effort put into it.' I believe that a comment such as that provides some ideas about what we consider important."

"Now that you mention that comment," said Geoff, "I am reminded of a conversation that Susan and I had the other day. We both found it quite striking that we suggest that parents urge their children to consider learning to be more than achieving good grades yet as teachers the only information we give parents is a grade. Aren't we sending conflicting messages? Aren't we contradicting what we say by what we do?"

"Ideally," said Ken, "we want our report cards to show parents what and how students are learning. Maybe we need to find out from parents whether they are receiving the information that they need."

Jacqui realized it was getting near time to wrap things up. "Let's try to formulate a proposal for the rest of the staff," she said. "Shall we use the principle that Lynn gave as a starting point? She stated that 'evaluation must communicate meaningful information to students and to parents.' Let's suggest that we reexamine the way in which we hold parent-teacher interviews. How meaningful can interviews be if parents are invited to come to a school gym to stand in line and, at best, meet for a few minutes with three of the seven teachers that their children have? Surely, we could improve how we communicate with parents."

"Yes," Geoff agreed, "that principle is a good starting point. We'll propose that Mountain City review the way it communicates information about learning. The review includes examining the report cards now used in grades five to twelve to find out if they communicate what we believe and value about our students and about learning. Does our report card help us to encourage student learning? Does it recognize student accomplishments? Do parents experience there as just one of the means of dialogue available?"

Jacqui had the last word. "Don't limit the review to grades five to twelve. We could also use another look at the K to four report card."

**The Purpose of Evaluation**

Christian schools face pressures similar to those in society at large. On the one hand, there are moves to increase the use of tests to measure student learning and to hold teachers more accountable for what students learn. On the other hand, alternative forms of evaluation are being developed (Archbald and Newmann 1988).

It is our conviction that Christian schooling for responsive discipleship must evaluate in ways that enable students to unfold their gifts, to share the burden of difficulties in learning, and to celebrate the joys of accomplishments. The purpose of evaluation is, first of all, to encourage and improve student learning. Evaluation should enable teachers and students to assess the extent to which they have met the learning goals they have established. Students must be given opportunities to be directly involved in describing how they see their own achievements and difficulties. They will be guided by an evaluation process that recognizes achievement and assists in diagnosing difficulties according to each student's level of ability and development intellectually, aesthetically, spiritually, physically, emotionally, and socially.

Second, evaluation must provide guidance for improving instruction. Teachers need information about student learning to help identify strengths and weaknesses in order to design their teaching in ways that best meet those needs. Instead of teaching to the test, teachers should be concerned with assessing student learning and on that basis evaluating their teaching.

Third, evaluation is necessary to account for the learning that occurs in schools to those responsible for the operation of the school. Appropriate authorities such as parents, school boards, and governments need information regarding the extent to which a school meets the goals and standards which they have set.

Fundamentally, however, Christian schools must evaluate in ways that encourage students to actively respond to the many different aspects of the curriculum. Learning is not for its own sake, but for the sake of being more effective servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. We will seek means of assessment that promote humble service rather than self glorifying achievement, and a positive account of abilities rather than a low estimate of self.

**The Process of Evaluation**
These purposes imply that teachers should develop the processes of evaluation as an integral part of the curriculum. If students have been actively engaged in learning by being provided with opportunities to develop different kinds of abilities and interests, if they have been able to integrate their learning within their own broader experiences and have been challenged to grow in wisdom and faithfulness, if the learning activities in which they have been involved have enabled them to develop their gifts in service of God and others, then the process of evaluation must support this rich learning.

Such a process must involve students, teachers, and parents in establishing the purpose of evaluation, determining the type of information necessary, and deciding meaningful ways of communicating about teaching and learning. The whole school community decides who will be involved and what methods will be used to evaluate learning, although teachers will have the major responsibility for initiating discussion with parents and students.

A major task involves determining the information that is required to provide meaningful descriptions of student learning. Teachers and parents can collect information through watching students in action, examining samples and collections of students' work, and talking with and listening to students. A wide variety of work should be collected to provide examples of what a student is able to do and to show students and parents the growth that has occurred over a period. By observing students interacting with peers, adults, and learning materials in a wide variety of activities, teachers will be able to attain a clearer idea of the things that students are able to do and the things they should be encouraged to develop further. Regular conversations and conferences with students will provide deeper insight into the learning that has occurred and will enable students to express ideas and feelings about their learning experiences in their own language.

Describing and interpreting what students are able to do and should be encouraged to do can best be accomplished on the basis of a rich collection of information. Have the students attained the goals of specific parts of the curriculum? Are they meeting the learning objectives that are considered important for their level of development? Description should always be in the context of previous and current knowledge about each student's situation.

The most difficult and the most important aspect of evaluation involves interpreting the information that has been collected. What does the information reveal about the student's learning? What does the teacher consider to be the learning that the student has achieved? How does the student interpret the things that have been done?

Communication about student learning should occur in many different ways. Throughout the school year, teachers must provide opportunities for sharing and conversing about information that invites Students and parents to be involved in the learning process. Parent-teacher-student conferences three times a year are one appropriate way to do that. In preparation for each conference, students take home a collection of the learning activities and assignments they have completed, teachers send home a brief overview of the units that have been the focus of student learning, students evaluate their own learning, and parents prepare their responses to the work that they have seen. The focus of the conference can more clearly be a dialogue about learning, rather than parents guessing what the assigned grade means.

The entire process of evaluation must be part of the ongoing teaching and learning experiences and reflect the regular conditions of the classroom.

**Multiple Avenues for Evaluation**

Christian schools must provide students with numerous opportunities for developing their gifts in interdependent and individual ways and with multiple avenues for students to show what they are able to do. We suggest five ways in which present methods of evaluation can be broadened: authentic tests, portfolios, self-evaluation, projects, and exhibitions.

**Authentic Tests**

Although changes are occurring in some schools, many studies report that teacher-made tests continue to emphasize short-answer questions which sample knowledge of facts, terms, and concepts, and contain predominantly lower-order questions (Stiggins et al. 1986, 6). This type of test reveals only a narrow part of what students learn and often restricts their responses to one predetermined answer.

Authentic tests would require the performance of exemplary tasks that replicate the standards of performance that people face in real life and are responsive to individual students and school communities (Wiggins 1989a, 703-4). Having decided what we want students to be good at, we must design tests that present students with the full array of tasks involved in challenges that lead to quality learning: writing, revising and discussing papers; engaging in oral analysis of recent political events; conducting research; and collaborating with others on a debate (Wiggins 1990, 1).
An authentic test enables us to watch students pose, tackle, and solve real challenges and problems. Newmann (1991, 460) states that tests should provide students with opportunities to produce original conversation and writing, to repair and build physical objects, and to be involved in artistic and musical performance.

**Central Station Christian School Oral History Project**

As part of a unit on "Searching for Our Roots," Emmy has the ninth graders design and complete an oral history project. Students are required to write a history based on interviews and written sources and to present their findings orally to the class. Students choose their own topics, create several workable hypotheses and develop four questions that they will ask to test each hypothesis. Completing the project requires demonstrating background research, interviewing at least four appropriate people as sources, using the evidence to support the choice of the best hypothesis, and organizing the writing and class presentation (Wiggins 1989, 707).

**Science Class Performance Test**

Ted has developed numerous problem tasks to challenge students to show what they are able to do. One of these tasks involves determining the density of fluids:

(a) The student is given four unknown liquids and a commercial hydrometer, and asked to solve the following problem:

Farmer Smith is having problems with his new tractor. He has decided to try the old Model A, his first tractor. The Model A has had all the oil drained out of her for storage. But Farmer Smith cannot recall which vat contains the right oil -- the oil with the highest possible density. You have been given a sample of the four vats of oil. Determine which one is for the Model A.

(b) Using the equipment: provided, construct and calibrate a hydrometer:

You should have:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Straws</th>
<th>plasticine</th>
<th>lead shot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wax pencil</td>
<td>ziplock bags</td>
<td>ruler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cylinder of water</td>
<td>cylinder of glycol</td>
<td>masking tape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(density = 9 g/ml)</td>
<td>(density = 1.3g/ml)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After completing the task, students must write a description of what they have done to reach the conclusion they did.

**Portfolios**

A second avenue for expanding evaluation in Christian schools involves the use of portfolios. At the elementary level, a number of schools have begun to develop collections of student work which they make available from time to time during conferences with students and use as an integral part of discussions with parents. A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits to the student and others the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area. This collection must include: student participation in selection of content; the criteria for selection and for judging merit; and evidence of student self-evaluation (Arter 1990, 2). Using portfolios to evaluate student learning provides a way of increasing student responsibility for their own work, enlarging teachers' and students' views of what has been learned, and showing the development that occurs over a longer period (Wolf 1989, 37-38).

Students' portfolios will become showcases for a great variety of student work, and will document learning throughout the school year.

**Central Station Christian School**
Middle School Writing Portfolios

As part of her language arts program, Karla requires students to read at least a half-hour per day and to produce no fewer than six rough draft pages of writing a week. At regular intervals students are asked to rank their work from most effective to least effective and to evaluate it by considering the following questions:

1. What makes this your best piece?
2. How did you go about writing it?
3. What problems did you encounter? How did you solve them?
4. What makes your most effective piece different from your least effective piece?
5. What goals did you set for yourself? How well did you accomplish them?
6. What are your goals for the next four weeks?

Over time, Karla began to see more diversity and depth to student writing, their reading, and their responses to literature. She discovered that students knew themselves better as learners, set goals for themselves, and judged how well they had reached those goals. Reflecting on her experiences, Karla agreed that "as teachers we have to believe in the possibilities of our students by trusting them to show us what they know and valuing what they are able to do with that knowledge" (Rief 1990, 25).

Mountain City Christian School
Grade Four Reading Assessment Portfolio

During the last two years, Jim has initiated portfolios as a way of broadening his evaluation of student reading. He had experienced a number of frustrations in his teaching. It seemed that students weren't becoming responsible for their own reading; he was making most of the choices about what they would read. He began to use portfolios as a way of developing their responsibility. Four principles had guided his approach: evaluation would be based on their reading of a variety of books, would examine student reading over an extended period, would include multidimensional responses, and would involve collaborative reflection by student and teacher.

The portfolio that Jim designed was an expandable file folder that held (a) samples of a student's work, (b) teacher's observational notes, (c) student's periodic self-evaluation, and (d) progress notes contributed by the student and teacher collaboratively. Portfolios came to include a broad range of items, such as written responses to reading, reading logs, selected daily work, pieces of work at various stages of completion, classroom tests, checklists, and unit projects (Valencia 1990, 338).

Jim considered one of the major benefits of portfolios to be their value in teacher-student and parent-teacher-student conferences: they were a basis for discussion of progress in reading and for the setting of future goals, an excellent way to focus on the learning that students had accomplished, and the basis for a mutual exchange about what should be done next.

Self Evaluation

Mountain City Christian School
Major Assessment in Science – Student Self-Evaluations

In her eleventh-grade science class, Susan has incorporated student self-evaluation as an important part of her evaluation of the two major assignments that students complete during the year. After the assignments have been written she has students answer six questions:

1. How much time did you spend on this paper?
2. Describe the process you went through to create this paper by addressing these questions:
(a) Where did you get the idea for the paper?
(b) What strategies did you use to help you explore the subject?
(c) What problems did you have while writing the first draft?
(d) How did you go about making revisions?

3. Group comments: First, list a point your group made about your paper. Then respond to their comments. For example, do you agree or disagree with what they said? Do this for two or three of the comments your group made.

4. What are the strengths of your paper? What parts still make you feel uneasy?

5. What do you want me to look for when I evaluate this paper? What questions do you have for me?

6. What grade would you put on this paper and why? (Thompson, in Arter 1990)

Susan has found that this process has changed the ways in which students work on the assignments. As they reflect on what they have done previously, they begin to think about what they are doing in the process of researching and writing. Also, Susan finds that the self-evaluations provide her with a much broader understanding of each student for her own evaluation of the papers.

Projects

A fourth avenue for expanding student evaluation in Christian Schools is a series of projects: the topics and themes will grow out of students’ interests and gifts in the context of a curriculum designed to bring about responsive discipleship. Projects should be based on real-life situations, have guidelines to give direction, have open-ended rather than predictable results, and address real needs in the broader community:

Projects should be an integral part of the curriculum and should be designed so that they require students to formulate and to ask worldview questions, to explain themselves to peers and to adults, and to develop and apply their gifts in service to God and their neighbors. Projects offer students opportunities to establish connections between their school learning and the real-life settings where they will soon be expected to perform adult roles. Christian schools should have students design projects that involve them in activities in the Christian community as well as in the broader community in which the school is located.

Students choose and design their own projects in consultation with a staff advisor and, outside the school, with a person who has special interest and skills in the project topic.

Table 4
Projects Requiring Challenging, Meaningful Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Project</th>
<th>Purpose of Project</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>To meet an individual or communal need.</td>
<td>Discover a need. Develop an action plan. Carry out the plan (expecting no reward). Reflect on the experience of bringing healing and restoration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring vocations</td>
<td>To learn about a specific vocation.</td>
<td>Select a vocation. Observe, study, and participate in it, exploring its tendencies, abilities, and skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring the outdoors</td>
<td>To explore the wonders of the world and develop</td>
<td>Plan a one- or two-week experience around this activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
survival and endurance skills.

Students should have the opportunity to work on individual as well as group projects and, upon completion, to make a public presentation of their work. Projects have the potential to become an invaluable extension and fulfillment of what students have learned during their years in Christian schooling.

Exhibitions

A fifth avenue for expanding evaluation of student learning is through exhibitions. One of the goals of Christian schooling is to celebrate the accomplishments of students and to recognize the learning that has been achieved. Exhibitions provide an avenue for students to demonstrate what they have learned and a way for members of a school community to celebrate what its students have accomplished. At present, Christian schools have a variety of public celebrations involving drama, music, academic, and athletic performances. They will provide even greater encouragement for learning by requiring that all students present a public demonstration of a project that is an integral part of the curriculum and is directly related to one or more of the goals of Christian schooling. Exhibitions will enable students to study a topic or area in which they have special interests and gifts and show publicly what they have accomplished and thereby contribute to the learning of others. The following example is adapted from Sizer (1992, 23):

Human Tendencies

Select one of the following human tendencies:

- joy, courage, kindness, anger, fear, faithfulness, patience, gentleness, envy, hatred, cowardice, love, greed.

In an essay, define the human tendency you choose, drawing on your own and other’s experience within a biblical perspective. Render a similar definition using in turn at least three of the following forms of expression:

- a drawing, painting, or sculpture; photographs, a video, or film; a written language other than English; a musical composition; a short story or play; a pantomime or dance.

Select examples from literature, journalism, the arts, and history of other people's definitions or representations of the tendency you have chosen.

Be ready in six months to present this work and answer questions about it. The exhibition will be judged on the basis of its creativity, overall coherence and development, and thoughtfulness, as well as the quality of each of the components.

Christian schools must enable teachers and students to evaluate learning in ways that stimulate the development of a diversity of gifts. Our schools must value many different ways of growing in knowledge and understanding as we learn. Christian schools must design a process in which students, teachers, and parents evaluate learning in ways that encourage individual and communal gifts, joyfully recognizing growth and accomplishments and openly addressing difficulties.

Questions for Discussion

I. What are the evaluation procedures that are used in your school and in your class? Examine these in the light of the principles of evaluation described in this chapter.

2. How can schools encourage the development of a variety of gifts? Considering the program(s) offered in your school what gifts are students presently encouraged to develop?
3. Review the process used in your school for parent-teacher-student conferences. Are conferences scheduled so that parents have adequate opportunities to meet with teachers? Are students included in the conference? Involve parents, teachers, and students in a discussion of ways in which your school can improve communication about learning.

4. In this chapter we suggest five avenues in which Christian schools can expand their approach to evaluation. Some teachers may already be using one or more of these avenues now. If so, ask them to present what they are doing as part of a staff discussion. If none of these are presently being used, explore one or more of these further and present it to your staff to stimulate thinking about evaluating student learning.

**Recommended Reading**

   A valuable resource for reviewing the purpose and functions of evaluation and for considering new ways of evaluating student learning.

   Provides strategies for improving academic achievement in high schools.

   Many excellent articles to stimulate thinking about student assessment.

   A helpful article and bibliography for initiating staff discussion on the use of portfolios in student evaluation.