

HOW TO KILL

ADVENTIST EDUCATION

(and How to Give It a Fighting Chance!)

Shane Anderson



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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Elva “Grackie” Pohl,
whose nearly nine decades of intellectual
pursuits continue to proclaim that Christians
should never stop learning.

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PREFACE

I am very reluctant to write this book.

At first it seemed like a great idea: write down some ideas about Adventist education, throw in a vivid anecdote or two, and see what the Lord does with it. But after hammering away at this thing for quite some time, I am increasingly tempted to become nervous, tentative, and, yes, reluctant to publish what you'll find in the pages ahead.

Why? Because I am an *outsider*.

You see, I am not now, nor have I ever been a professional educator, much less one in the Adventist educational system.* I've never had to make lesson plans year after year; never taken a single course on how to be a professional teacher; and never had to learn to deal constantly with parents, students, and fellow teachers and staff with the intensity that professional teachers commonly experience throughout their careers. All of which has led me to ask an uncomfortable question: What fool would presume to write a book on the challenges facing Adventist education—much less how to actually *meet* those challenges—when they've never been a professional educator a day in their life?

Well, since you're now reading this book, I suppose that the fool . . . is me. But my prayer is that my foolishness will nonetheless prove helpful because of a single factor: perspective.

It is true that I'm not a professional teacher or school administrator. But in addition to having immense respect for those who are, I have been honored to be in close contact with a large number of education professionals for extended periods of time throughout my personal and professional life. As an Adventist pastor, all of the congregations that I've worked with have been constituents of Adventist schools. I've also served on a conference executive committee (which often dealt with the intimate and at times gritty details of primary and secondary school issues), and I've sat on the boards of multiple schools at both the primary and secondary levels. (And in case you're wondering, yes, I attended Adventist schools for all of my formal schooling from first grade through my master's degree.)

All of which brings me back to that point regarding perspective. Though

I am an “outsider,” I have had significant contact with Adventist education in a variety of settings that has left me with some very distinct impressions as to what works in our schools and what doesn’t. Like so many others before me, I too have wrestled with the reality of declining enrollment, declining funding, and declining enthusiasm for our educational system. I’ve fought long and hard for that system to become successful. And as time marches on and more and more schools close, I feel it would be irresponsible of me not to at least attempt to share some of my “foolishness” with others in the hope that my outsider’s perspective might provide a unique vantage point that other schools can benefit from.

So consider yourself warned: much reluctant, outsider foolishness lies ahead! And may it be as much a blessing for you reading it as it has been for me writing it.

* As thrilling as it was, I’m reluctant to count my student missionary experience teaching high school one year in Micronesia as one of being “a professional educator.”

FOREWORD

Regardless of their church affiliations now, most former students of Adventist education have good feelings about it. My experience indicates that they will tell you that they were well prepared for their specific career pursuits and life in general. What they may have missed in academic rigor was more than compensated for by character development and work ethics. Nearly all of these products of Adventist education want to see their alma maters succeed and find it troubling and painful if and when their schools languish and/or close.

We all have examples of the gradual, steady decline in enrollment of Adventist schools. All of us have participated in many, shall we say, “ain’t it awful” discussions (in closed and open forums) that seldom produced actionable ideas. And often when we came up with seemingly actionable ideas, the journey through the labyrinth of committees and church hierarchy was more than could be endured, even for this noblest of causes.

Shane Anderson has done all of us a great favor with his book. As my pastor, I have observed the same careful logic and arguments employed in his sermons now used in his book. With the precision of a prosecuting attorney he lays out virtually all of the problems (perceived and actual) in Adventist education today and then systematically provides step-by-step, spiritual, and actionable procedures to make measurable improvements. To God be the glory, there is empirical evidence that his recommendations really do produce measurable results.

In this book you will find something that *you* can do for the good of Adventist education. I too believe that quality Adventist education is an important component in improving the Adventist church and fulfilling the gospel commission. If you are motivated at all to advance Adventist education today, I believe you will find fresh and practical ideas here that will give Adventist education a fighting chance.

By the way, chapter 19 is worth the price of the book. Pastor Shane is at his best in this no-holds-barred discourse. If you get a little light-headed with “straight talk,” you’d better stick with Dick and Jane.

— Dale Twomley

INTRODUCTION:

The Incredible Vanishing School

I'm a huge fan of Adventist education. Let me tell you why.

In my experience Adventist education is one of the most effective ways to prepare young people for the second coming of Christ. Furthermore, I believe that our schools—rightly run—are more successful at doing this than any other single evangelistic method, including Revelation seminars, church planting, felt-needs evangelism, or contemporary worship services. Also I believe that Adventist education has been the key to propagating our unique Adventist mission in the world. It has been the medium for sharing our values, finding our spouses, and raising Advent-minded families. Adventist education has even provided a nationwide and, yes, global sense of connectedness and community for more than 10 generations of students. And for the majority of our church's history, our schools have done highly significant work in guaranteeing that if Christ waits another generation before He returns, there will still be a faithful Adventist Church charging ahead, seeking to present souls to God for His kingdom. We are a called people, designed to be an end-time, Jesus-loving, Satan-crushing steamroller of a movement that passionately pursues Christ and His cause at the climax of history—and I believe that whatever our success has been at being that is, in very large part, a result of Adventist education.

All of which makes our current situation in the North American Division more than a little hard to swallow.

With a few encouraging exceptions, Adventist education in North America appears to be faltering. For instance, between 1980 and 2008 overall church membership in the North American Division (NAD) rose from 606,430 members to approximately¹ 1,082,900—a gain of 476,470 members, adding up to a 79 percent increase in that 28-year span of time.² Unfortunately, during that same period K-12 enrollment in the NAD decreased by 18,157 students. That equals a nearly 33 percent *drop* during the same period of time that the NAD *grew* by nearly 80 percent. (Indeed, it is part of a worldwide trend in Adventist education. As George Knight points out: “In 1945 the ratio of students in Adventist schools [worldwide] to church mem-

bership was 25 per 100. . . . But since [1965], the ratio has dropped off precipitously, to 15 per 100 in 1985 and 9 per 100 in 2000.”³

Sadly, this phenomenon of drastically declining school enrollment in spite of overall NAD growth takes on an additional dynamic when it comes to Adventist colleges and universities. According to a study published by the NAD and the Center for Creative Ministry, only an estimated 33 percent of eligible college-age Seventh-day Adventist students attend Adventist colleges and universities. *Fully two thirds of eligible Adventist college students choose non-Adventist schools.*

In light of such statistics, the resulting stories coming from our schools are predictably grim. Each successive school year brings word of yet another of our approximately 1,000 NAD school campuses either struggling mightily to survive or closing its doors altogether. Local school boards across the land meet late into the night, trying to figure out how to deal with still further declines in enrollment. Conference executive committees stare in despair as still another request for hundreds of thousands of dollars in “special subsidy” comes rolling in from their conference academy. And even some of our colleges, comparative giants though they may be, are having their share of severe financial and enrollment crises. (In fact, as I write this, one more of our longtime colleges is gearing up for a pivotal meeting that will seriously consider the destiny of the school—as in whether or not it will remain open.)

In the face of such problems, many of our school boards and staff members have taken heroic measures to right their respective ships. But honesty demands a painful admission: *More often than not, in spite of our best efforts, the decline has continued.* And the lack of progress has led many of us to give up, plop down in one of the deck chairs on our educational *Titanic*, and speak wistfully of the good old days when our schools (and perhaps even our coffers) were full. Too often we are a people both tired and grieved, waiting for the inevitable vortex of death to suck us down.

If that sounds overly dramatic, check things out for yourself. Take a hard look at the state of Adventist education in your own area and across our division. You will discover that in fact, we have a number of schools that are thriving⁴—perhaps even a few that have waiting lists of students clamoring to enroll. But those are in the minority. The majority of what you’ll find consist of schools struggling not merely with shifting demographics or gen-

erational population dips, but also with severe, life-threatening problems, particularly among smaller elementary schools and boarding academies. (Another example: for the 2005–2006 school year the North Pacific Union Conference reported that it had 7,550 students enrolled in its K–12 program. Sounds good. But unfortunately, this represented a drop of *nearly 600 students compared with the previous five years.*)⁵

The resulting financial troubles that many conferences face are so severe that in some areas administrators are actively looking for ways to unload their conference-sponsored secondary education programs, hoping to turn them into local church constituent-run schools and in the process free up much-needed capital in the conference treasury for other projects.

Thus Adventist education finds itself at a crossroads. It is not the first time. But unless the church takes appropriate action soon, it may well be the last.

A brief word on this book's organization. We'll begin with a look at some of the commonly held misconceptions as to the root causes of Adventist educational decline. Then in part two we'll examine carefully what I believe are the true causes. In part three we'll consider what can kill struggling Adventist schools. Finally, in part four, we'll focus on possible solutions to the Adventist educational crisis.

So let's get to it! As you read, my hope is that in some small way this book will inspire you as an educational leader—which every one of you are if you have an interest in our children knowing Christ—to act boldly and implement the changes required for our schools to have a fighting chance at not merely surviving, but *thriving*. The “deceased” truly is not yet dead! And by the grace of God, we can yet turn the tide before it is too late.

¹ At this writing, NAD membership statistics for 2008 are not yet finalized. However, between 1997 and 2007, membership grew an average 1.95 percent each year. Using this average, we are able to extrapolate on the 2007 total and arrive at an approximate membership for 2008.

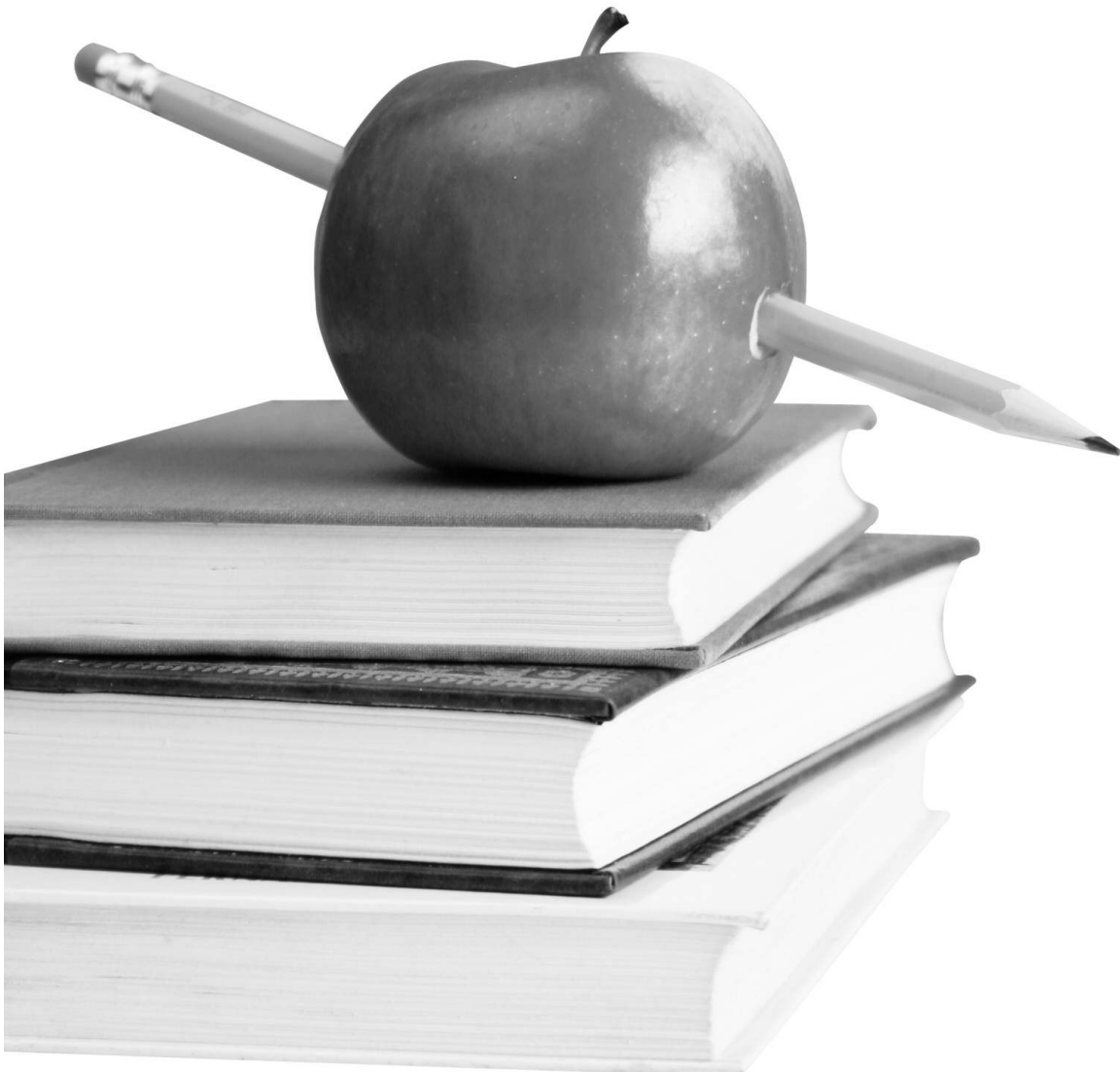
² From a study done by Monte Sahlin published in the book *Trends, Attitudes, and Opinions: The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America* (see p. 122 for a chart illustrating this trend). Available from AdventSource: 800-328-0525 or at www.adventsource.org.

³ George R. Knight, in *Journal of Adventist Education*, Summer 2005.

⁴ For instance, for the 2005–2006 school year, Walla Walla College (now Walla Walla University) had its highest enrollment in 20 years: 1,942 students. The late 1990s showed similar trends for Andrews University, Loma Linda University, Oakwood College, and Southwestern Adventist University.

⁵ North Pacific Union Conference *Gleaner* (the official union paper), August 2006. Statistics taken from www.gleaneronline.org/101/8/29404.html.

PART ONE:
THE SECONDARY
CAUSES OF THE CURRENT CRISIS



How We Didn't Quite Get Into This Mess

When fixing a problem, it's helpful to know not merely what it is, but what caused it. So let's look at a vital question: What brought Adventist education into the difficulties it currently faces?

When I have asked concerned Adventists this question, they give a fairly limited range of answers, such as the following:

"I don't know."

"Parents just aren't committed to Adventist institutions anymore."

"Adventist education is too expensive."

"We don't market our schools effectively enough. If more people knew about them, they would be thriving."

The trouble with such answers is twofold. First, they are usually followed by conversations that are lamentably short. A bit of speculation followed by a moving on to other subjects seems to satisfy our limited curiosity on the topic (or perhaps our fatalism sees further conversation as pointless). Second, while these answers all contain elements of helpful truth (with the possible exception of the first example), they don't grasp the true depth of the problem. Let's take a moment to analyze each of the last three answers briefly.

The Death of Brand Loyalty

Take the idea of declining commitment to Adventist institutions. In days past, Adventists often took pride in their highly developed subculture (though we rarely put it in those terms). We had our own publications, our own traditions (popcorn and fruit at sundown on Sabbath), and of course, our own schools. In addition, we even had our own manufacturing facilities that produced choice morsels of food that no self-respecting Adventist potluck would

be without. With only a little tongue in cheek, we could loudly proclaim that “our hope is built on nothing less than Worthington and Pacific Press.”

But today there is little doubt that the heady days of Adventist brand loyalty are becoming a thing of the past. Many Adventists understand this intuitively already, but I’ll share just one example of this trend in action to illustrate.

According to Harold Lee, former president of the Columbia Union Conference, a comparative study between Adventists and 28 other Protestant denominations reveals that “members are giving [money] far less today than in the past. In 1968 giving was at 10.8 percent of after-tax income. By 1996 it had declined to 4.5 percent. This decline represents a 58 percent decrease in the portion of income being given by church members. . . . Church members are voting with their feet and with their dollars.”¹

This leads to the obvious conclusion that Adventists are increasingly spending less and less to purchase Adventist “products”—educational or otherwise. How come?

Too often—particularly among older members—the response is simply that we aren’t as loyal to Adventist institutions as we ought to be . . . *as though that were a complete answer in itself*. Far too often, members and education leaders that I have personally talked with in various portions of the United States have repeatedly retreated to this simplistic explanation, almost as though it were still 1955 and that institutional loyalty was still a widely held, finely tuned, and much-lauded part of the Adventist mind-set.

But it simply is not! Dedication to the “Adventist brand” is waning heavily . . . *and the problems with Adventist education go much deeper than a mere dearth of institutional loyalty*. In fact, flagging enthusiasm for SDA “brands” is *not* a core cause of Adventist educational decline, but rather another symptom of it (albeit an important one). Think of it this way: Do we really believe that there are large numbers of passionate, highly committed Seventh-day Adventists—*who also just happen to think that a school that would teach their children that that very same Adventism is not worth considering?* Of course not. Surely what we’re seeing here is a lack of commitment not just to our schools or other institutions, *but to Adventism itself*. Here is the core of our current crisis (as we will discuss further shortly).

Please note that I’m not saying that if you send your kids to non-Adventist schools, you’re not an Adventist. But I am most certainly declaring

that we currently have large numbers of baptized Seventh-day Adventists—paid clergy and laity—who, while they think much of Christ and His grace, don't have much regard for Adventist claims to having a unique mission in the world. Furthermore, Adventism has spent much of the past two decades attempting to move itself into mainstream Western culture, and in so doing Adventism's reason for being has been, in my opinion, clouded—and thus, unavoidably, its educational system has been obscured as well. Again, more on this in chapter 2 and subsequent chapters.

Too Costly?

What about the common thought that Adventist education is too expensive?

Certainly Adventist education is far from free (in some cases, *exceedingly* far). And, as we saw earlier, there exists a definite trend away from spending money on church-related institutions, one that certainly contributes both directly and indirectly to the perceptions of educational cost.

But the trouble with claiming high expense as a major reason for educational decline is that, depending on the school in question, such a claim can be answered *correctly* both “no, it's *not* too expensive” and “yes, it *is* too expensive.” Here's how such a thing can be so:

Let's take the “no, it's not too expensive” crowd first. Proponents of Adventist education have often answered the charge of being overpriced with sound financial information to the contrary. They point out, for instance, that their particular Adventist school teaches Adventist values both by example and verbal instruction. For committed Adventists, this is of immense importance. Additionally, proponents note that if we also think in terms of above-average academics as well as extracurricular activities (cultural field trips, sports, advanced classes for qualified students, etc.) at their school, the “inexpensiveness” of Adventist education becomes even more apparent. They further point out that there is precious little financial profit—if any—built into the tuition and fees of Adventist schools—parents are paying for what they're getting, and often at a price that approaches bargain status.

This can be doubly true when one compares certain facets of Adventist schools to their public school counterparts. Many of our teachers, for instance—particularly long-tenured or postsecondary teachers—receive markedly lower wages in comparison to their peers in the public school sys-

tem. (Translation: Those high tuition bills aren't there to make our teachers rich!) Or consider this: In some of the areas in which I've been associated with our schools, the expense required to educate one student in an Adventist school has been significantly lower than that required in the area public schools. Of course, Adventist parents, even though they may send their kids to Adventist schools, still have to pay local and state taxes. But the cost comparison between the two systems is nonetheless helpful in shedding light on the relative affordability of many of our schools.

All this adds up to the conclusion that when compared to other types of schools, Adventist institutions are often reasonably priced for what's being offered. (I remember the story of one of our most expensive academies being visited by some non-Adventist parents to see if their child might attend there. When they heard the price of tuition, they immediately and in complete seriousness asked, "What's wrong with your school?" They couldn't imagine how a quality Christian education could be so comparatively inexpensive.)

So based on what their school offers, these proponents argue that while Adventist education is not what we would call cheap, their particular school is reasonably priced when viewed within an Adventist values, academic, and extracurricular activity perspective.

Are they correct?

Probably so—again, for their particular school. And at the very least, such testimony ought to be good incentive for parents to take a second look at the perceived "over-priced-ness" of their school's tuition. It may be that upon inspection of the alternatives, they will find that Adventist school to be a relative bargain instead of a bank-busting lemon of an education.

But what about the "yes, it is too expensive" crowd? Can they too be correct in their assessment of Adventist education? They can, and in at least four ways.

First, for those church members not overly concerned about propagating Adventist values to their children, Adventist education does indeed appear overly expensive. It simply offers a product they are not interested in, and they will instead choose a good Christian school (usually closer to home geographically) or a quality public school.

Second, there are what we might call the "moderately committed" Adventists who want to send their children to Adventist school, but only if it's

conveniently priced. They truly like their church and want their children to grow to share that affection through Adventist education, but only as long as it's relatively easy to do so within their perceived budgetary constraints.

I say “*perceived* budgetary constraints” because while this particular type of Adventist truly likes their church, they are often also fond of their Jet Skis, SUVs, and big-screen TVs. And when push comes to shove, the toys win out over tuition. Thus, for them, school tuition is indeed too expensive.

(Allow me a brief sermon here. I am not saying it is of necessity a sin to have the toys. Abraham, as I recall, was lavishly wealthy and had the hardware to prove it. But I am saying that hedonism and selfishness may be coming to play far too great a role among some Adventists when it comes to making educational choices for their kids. And if Adventists profess affection for their church and then send their children to non-Adventist schools because it's “just too expensive” to do otherwise—all the while pouring large chunks of money into fun toys that will nonetheless burn when Jesus returns—then perhaps it's time for a little honesty. Big tuition bills may not be the problem. Instead it may be misplaced priorities, which leads to the obvious question: Which is more important in the scope of eternity? The toys/cars/house/etc.? Or potentially eternal life for one's kids? True, Adventist education can't guarantee that one's children will be in heaven. But in the spirituality department, it'll blow our jet skis into the weeds nearly every time.)

Third, even for Adventists who *are* heavily committed to their God and their church, there is absolutely no doubt that while Adventist education may be a relative bargain for what you get in return, it can still cost a ton of money! Ten to eighteen thousand dollars for a year at our boarding academies, for instance, is the norm. *And that's for a high school, not a college education!* For lower- and middle-income families, that price tag can be a real challenge to meet. (And speaking of high school/college tuition parity, a parent recently remarked to me what a relief it would be to have their student go to James Madison University, a nationally respected school in central Virginia. The reason for that relief? The yearly tuition would be a mere \$6,000 per year—about \$11,000 less than that charged for a boarding student at the Adventist academy their daughter was graduating from!)

Keen observers will note that some non-Adventist schools (such as the

aforementioned James Madison University) have some financial resources—big endowments, eligibility for certain grants—that we don't have and thus we can't be expected to offer their (in some instances) lower prices. Granted. But ultimately that may be beside the point. The bottom line still is that Adventist education, even for the dedicated lower-to-middle income member, is becoming very highly priced indeed. And if the trend of increasing tuition continues, and we do not come up with commensurate financial aid resources, we may not only price ourselves out of the market, we may also eliminate all but the very well-heeled.

Fourth and last, for those parents who are deeply concerned about passing on Adventist values, Adventist education too often is also deemed too expensive for them . . . *because the particular school they're looking at isn't particularly Adventist.* Whether it's a fuzzy focus on Christ or a lack of emphasis on the unique mission, values, and standards of Adventism, in my experience many of our schools lack a sufficiently Adventist flavor, and Adventist parents increasingly aren't willing to pay the price to send their kids to such institutions.

And no wonder such parents are concerned! At the risk of stating the obvious, Adventist education should seek to achieve a goal far greater than superior academics, outstanding extracurricular activities, or even superior character development, as important as all these may be. It should seek to *establish in our children a personal relationship with Jesus Christ so that they may be lifelong Seventh-day Adventist witnesses for Him.* And if that unique goal is absent, devout Adventist parents rightly look at high tuition prices and deem correctly that they are indeed too expensive! *The "Adventist flavor" issue is vital,* and we will discuss it more shortly.

Obviously the question of the price of tuition is a major concern when discerning the causes of Adventist educational decline. We'll explore ways to deal with this in chapter 18.

Are We Poorly Marketed?

What about the idea that inferior marketing accounts for a large share of our schools' demise?

I mean no harm when I say that in my experience, many of our schools (and churches, for that matter), while not intentionally so, are not experts in presenting themselves to their communities. Most school leaders under-

standably are not marketing professionals and may lack the money, time, and other resources to become marketing-savvy.

But that said, let's be certain that we understand *whom* we feel that we are missing through a lack of marketing skill. Almost always, when I've heard Adventists calling for better promotion of our schools, the goal is to try to reach *non-Adventists*—an intriguing focus given our recent “marketing history.”

Most people would agree that the promotional programs of many of our schools today, challenged though they are, are in many ways an improvement when compared to those of the schools of the 1970s and 1980s. In those days mass mailings, community focus groups, demographic studies, niche marketing techniques, etc., were not high on most of our schools to-do lists. But here's the irony: While Adventist education is struggling today, on the whole it was *thriving* 20 and 30 years ago—a time when our marketing efforts were supposedly inferior. Why did we thrive back then, even with subpar marketing approaches?

It is not because of some mysterious magnetism that we had in the 1970s and 1980s (though I've always thought that those big-hair and polyester pants pictures on our brochures from that era did have a certain magnetism about them . . .), but rather something much more mundane that we discussed earlier in this chapter: *Adventists of that time naturally filled our schools*. It's just what we as Adventists did (though most did *not* do so mindlessly—they had a reason for their choice, as we'll explore later). Adventist parents had Adventist kids who enrolled in Adventist schools.

But today they don't—certainly not in the numbers they did in the past. And since most schools often aren't sure *why* they don't, they can't pursue those Adventists with the proper enticements. So we have instead turned to marketing to *non-Adventists*. “If we can just get the word out about the great things going on at our school, non-Adventist parents will be much more likely to send their kids to our school,” we say. And certainly some non-Adventist students would come to our schools if they were properly marketed to.

But not many.

I wish I could say otherwise, but experience is a good teacher, and with very few exceptions,² my observation has been that even the best of marketing to non-Adventists rarely yields the results that we crave. The scenario I've encountered usually runs something like this. An Adventist school gets