

THE SECRET SAUCE: WHAT MAKES NEW COVENANT UNIQUE?

by John Heaton

The are several factors that makes New Covenant unique among schools. We could point to the classical, Christian tradition from which the curriculum has been deeply shaped. While that is a key factor, it doesn't completely explain the culture of the school. There are two other things that should be considered. Our consultants at Independent School Management (ISM) have conducted longitudinal research to determine the factors that contribute most powerfully to student success and well-being. With data from more than 4,000 schools they have found incontrovertibly that the biggest drivers in student success are predictability and support. Put simply, this refers to clear expectations, compassionately delivered. We can think of these factors as the two rails on which a train runs. The rails are not the main thing, the train is, so these two "rails" are carefully maintained in our school.

The value of a well-ordered school cannot be overstated. Children thrive when they have routines that are clear and consistent, and a school culture that is structured provides the framework for the most freedom. When you walk the halls of the school you will see children on task, teacher-centered classrooms, and very happy students across the grades. There is an obvious freedom that seems to flourish, especially in the high school, where students in the commons busily work on their laptops with their lattes, their microwaves, and other comforts. Ours is a culture of students learning

responsible behavior in an ordered, but liberating environment. Because there is a culture of respect and trust between faculty and students, everyone enjoys an atmosphere of freedom unparalleled in most other schools.

What do we mean by predictability?

First, we mean that the "rule-reward" structure is strong, but also intelligible and fair from the student perspective. We measure this over time with student surveys, and the responses we get from fifth grade and higher consistently confirm that our teachers excel at modeling the values and communicating the expectations of our community. This leads to the second element, that faculty responses are consistent, fair, and accurate from the student perspective both academically and behaviorally. Students consistently tell us that they knew what would be on the test, or that certain behaviors were permitted or not. They generally know that faculty demonstrate an evenness in their application of rules, policies and procedures.

Predictability and support are vital in the parent relationship as well. It shows most clearly in the overall management of classrooms and communication. A parent whose child enters New Covenant in the first grade should have a consistent experience regardless of who is teaching which section. When a student moves to the second grade, the experience should feel the same. Allowing for differences in giftedness from teacher to teacher, the transition from grade to grade should be largely monolithic, not wholly other. It is on this basis that we ask parents to refrain from requesting a student's teacher each year. All teachers at New Covenant are trained in our model of

student culture, which yields a consistent classroom experience regardless of the personalities and gifts in play.

What do we mean by support? A well-ordered school culture can be rigid if it is not accompanied by high levels of support. We define support for your child as an environment where students perceive that the entire faculty, administration, and coaching staffs genuinely seek the students' success and work to achieve that success without inflated reinforcement. A large part of a teacher's task is to give feedback constantly to students – feedback in regard to behavior, attitudes, character and academic performance. By definition a student could be made to feel overly scrutinized, unless he enjoyed the natural and pervasive sense of compassion and the teacher's clear desire for conspicuous success. While reinforcement within a healthy community is accurate ("Samuel was caught cheating and will have to suffer the consequences"), accurate assessment is not contrary to compassionate delivery. Our teachers are constantly encouraged to be accurate and firm, yet speak with compassion, from the platform of a good relationship.

Building a strong and stable school culture allows us to make mistakes, fall short, or overcommit (we do!). The goal, however, is to learn from such episodes. A healthy community recognizes human frailty and supports its members through the sometimes painful process of growth, helps to create a willingness to try again, try harder, and improve. This is at the heart of creating and maintaining the unique community that is New Covenant Schools.