



Association of Christian Schools International

“Kids These Days” in a World of Change



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“I can’t get my students to read a book!” “Some kid just handed me a paper—all in lowercase!” “They’re addicted to Facebook.” “How do you talk to a student who has an iPod on?” And so on. Anyone who’s entered a faculty lounge or a teacher workroom in the last couple of years has heard (or made) similar comments. They reflect a growing frustration that it seems harder to reach the student generation and that teacher authority holds less weight than it did even a decade ago.



We seem a bit resigned to accepting disconnect with our students as we puzzle over distinctions between digital natives and digital immigrants and gaze over desks at students who think we don’t see them texting—or just don’t care. We may even enter into the text-messaging fray and download hip, new ringtones for our phones, but we are still marginal to our students’ worlds—lonely in our crowded classrooms.

In this article, I’ll explore a few social changes affecting Christian schools and their students. My goal is to show how some student behaviors and some of the ways families now relate to Christian education are connected to profound changes in the broader culture.

Some of the changes that affect us most—in both positive and negative ways—stem from our enchantment with communication technologies and the worldview driving it. Perhaps the most important changes are in how families have come to think about the Christian school and the space it occupies in their lives. Our use of technology and the “efficient means-to-ends” way we approach things has influenced the character of our commitment to school, church, and community.

The Irresistible Pull of Technology Sociologist

C. Wright Mills, in a 1959 essay titled “The Promise,” writes, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (1961, 3). In short, to understand personal biography—to understand who our students are—we must understand the milieu (social environment) in which they live.

The world around us compels particular modes of action that are hard to resist, even if we want to. The sheer size and proliferation of the information facilitated by technology and the Internet have a coercive effect on all of us, but especially on young people. One sociologist writes that the human race created more than 1,200 trillion bytes of printed information in the year 2000 alone—a figure that increases by 2 to 10 percent each year. To put this in perspective, a book that contained just one billion characters would be about 32 miles thick (2007, 123)! Absorbing, adapting to, and controlling this proliferated “culture” demand significant time and attention, and one cannot escape its influence.

For example, I have often wished that my students would temper their almost frantic text messaging and Facebook activity. In a college assignment, I gave students the option of going on a texting, media, and social networking fast for one week. During this week, students kept a journal. Most students reported that the first three days of the fast were like going through withdrawal—something was missing. After the third day, they actually enjoyed the respite. They had more meaningful face-to-face contact than usual and more time for schoolwork. But, as pleasant as this brief fast was, they felt cut off from their peers. They were absent from dorm events because of missed text invitations. They missed birthday greetings on Facebook and faced hostility from others for whom their digital fast caused complications.



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The way students use communication technologies sometimes frustrates us, but it is driven by the larger technological milieu in which they live. For them, to choose not to use these technologies is to risk ostracization and to vacate the worlds inhabited by their peers (and increasingly their parents). When we view students—“kids these days”—as problems, as having some internal flaw in need of correction, we sometimes overlook the context that envelops them.

By no means am I suggesting that students aren’t responsible for their behavior or that they can’t learn to fit into a variety of worlds—including

mine, in which you don't text during class. But simply controlling or reining in their worlds as unimportant is to overlook an important source of their identity and something from which they cannot escape.

This reliance on technology is not limited to youth. My wife, a Christian high school guidance counselor, explains that students on class trips are but demand regular text messages and cell phone calls from them. Parents are "virtually" present on school trips, engaged in digitally managing their children. This practice has some good but also some potentially maturity-delaying implications. Again, the students are enveloped in a context that compels and coerces particular types of action. So when they sit in our classrooms texting, it is helpful to consider the technological world and information overload we, the parent generation, have created for them to navigate—a new world for which there are not yet clear norms.



Families, Schools, Covenant, and Commitment

Another social change influencing schools and students hails from the hyperindividualism saturating the Western world. Television advertisements promote products that can be created, customized, and ordered to reflect the "real you." Cars, iPods, computers, and pizzas can all be fashioned to your image and to your liking.

My wife and I have noticed school choice trending in this general direction. We remember a time when the Christian school, in concert with the church, composed almost the whole of the community for families. In recent years, my wife has perceived a more à la carte approach to choosing a school. The Christian school is considered one among many choices. It is not atypical for a family to choose a nonreligious preparatory school for one or two of their children and a Christian school for a third. Sometimes these choices are made with an eye on the perceived utility a particular school has for preparing a child for some future imagined career or college acceptance.

While parents undoubtedly have good reasons for choosing the schools they do—and I support parents exercising such choice—the idea of school as a covenant community can get lost in the somewhat frantic effort to turn our kids into successful adults. And in this process, we can easily lose sight of what so-called "success" is. Historically, the Christian school provided an alternative way of understanding success—an alternative lens through which to view one's activity in the world. In the Christian school, vocation and calling were stressed over the more secular notion of career.

In response to this noncovenantal, individualistic ethos, the Christian school can start caving to market-driven pressures to promote secularized forms of success, losing its alternative vision and countercultural worldview. We can begin caring about our image more than about our calling. But in an increasingly secularized and individualistic world, we need, more than ever, the perspective that Christian schools at their best can offer. Sociologists have used the phrase displacement of ends to describe how—in a world caught up in bureaucracy, efficiency, standardization, and control through technology—we can lose sight of meaningful goals and get caught in a cycle of busyness without real purpose.

Fearing Change, Responding in Faith

Change is ubiquitous, and change often brings fear. We fear a world different from the one we grew up in. We fear being irrelevant to our children in their strange, new digital worlds. We fear when we see Christian schools closing because of demographic shifts beyond our control, and we fear that people don't experience Christian school in the same covenantal sense that they used to.



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Change often makes us question our relevancy, but it also reminds us of our dependency on God. The Scriptures are filled with people of faith facing change, facing new ways and new challenges. And the Scriptures show God directing change—leading the Israelites out of Egypt, breaking into history with the Incarnation, and providing a way of redemption for a world gone wrong. Faith is most vibrant in circumstances beyond human control—when change overwhelms us. And the Scriptures promise renewal, when Christ will return and we will be like Him. Change can be good when you believe in the One who directs it. Seen this way, the Christian school is uniquely situated, in a secularized and noncovenantal world, to reanimate our collective imagination and help us prioritize the ongoing and infinitely meaningful goal of recognizing and pursuing the kingdom of God...for the sake of the "kids these days."

References

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Wright, 1961. The promise. In *The sociological imagination*, chap. 1. 1st Evergreen ed. New York: Grove Press. (Orig. pub. 1959.) Matthew Vos, PhD, is a professor of sociology at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He teaches subjects including introductory sociology, social theory, and research methods. His wife, Joan, is a guidance counselor at Chattanooga Christian School, which their two daughters attend.