Spiritual Formation Assessment

Dr. Erin Wilcox, Assistant Vice President, ACSI

Contributors: Dr. Matthew Lee, Director of Research, ACSI; Stephen Deck, Senior Director of Academic Services, ACSI
Introduction
In the research completed for the Flourishing Schools Culture Instrument, the creators collected expected student outcomes from the original 64 schools that participated. (See the Flourishing Schools Research Report, 2019.) As you can see from these results, many schools acknowledge that the spiritual formation of their students is key, and essential to target in the lives of their graduates. There are spiritual aspects in many areas; not just the one labeled 'spiritual.' The question becomes, how do we assess these areas of growth? Most schools would agree that some are easier than others. Some are heart level commitments and others are the outworking of those commitments.

Another important element is the overall culture of the school. Spiritual growth in students is not simply a function of what students learn but is also dependent on the total experience of that student in the school. Who students see as role models, what service experiences they are involved in, and relationships within the community all affect spiritual growth. Very few surveys capture that broader view. The Flourishing Schools Culture Inventory is an instrument that can be used to assess some of those school-culture level conditions that affect the development of spiritual formation in students. For more information, see the reference at the end of this document.

Table 1. Meta-Analysis of Christian Schools' Expected Student Outcomes (ESOs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Excellence</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Servanthood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✔ Spiritual Formation</td>
<td>✔ Reading</td>
<td>✔ Relationships</td>
<td>✔ Body as temple of Holy Spirit</td>
<td>✔ Serve Christ</td>
<td>✔ Serve Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Relationship with Jesus</td>
<td>✔ Writing</td>
<td>✔ Partnerships</td>
<td>✔ Responsibility</td>
<td>✔ Serve Others</td>
<td>✔ Serve Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Christian Worldview</td>
<td>✔ Speaking</td>
<td>✔ Families</td>
<td>✔ Skill Development</td>
<td>✔ Humility</td>
<td>✔ Humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Empowered by Holy Spirit</td>
<td>✔ Math</td>
<td>✔ Friendships</td>
<td>✔ Integrity</td>
<td>✔ Good stewardship of time, talent, and treasure</td>
<td>✔ Good stewardship of time, talent, and treasure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Visible fruit of the Spirit</td>
<td>✔ Science</td>
<td>✔ Social/Civic</td>
<td>✔ Dignity in work</td>
<td>✔ Willingness to work hard</td>
<td>✔ Willingness to work hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Critical Thinking</td>
<td>✔ History</td>
<td>✔ Mark of Christian life</td>
<td>✔ Use gifts to influence the world</td>
<td>✔ Outreach activities</td>
<td>✔ Outreach activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Problem-Solving</td>
<td>✔ Wisdom</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔ Leadership</td>
<td>✔ Serve family and community</td>
<td>✔ Serve family and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Research</td>
<td>✔ Social/Civic</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔ Great Commission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ Lifelong Learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

63 schools 63 schools 54 schools 52 schools 41 schools 31 schools

We read in Hebrews 11:1 that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (KJV). As evidence, there are dimensions of faith that we can observe and measure, however imperfectly. While it may not be possible to truly measure a student's level of spirituality or Christlikeness, the school can measure a student's understanding and articulation of specific beliefs, and the level at which a student demonstrates those beliefs, as well as whether the student is grasping specific beliefs the school is teaching throughout its instructional and non-instructional programs. Further, the school should also evaluate its own effectiveness in providing instructional and non-instructional spiritual formation opportunities to students.

The rest of this paper will address the concept of spiritual formation assessment and hopefully give schools a new perspective and provide some age-appropriate strategies for assessing spiritual formation. When assessing spiritual formation, the school should look for growth, development, and a maturity of understanding. This is not a test of spirituality or a test to judge if
spiritual formation assessment

...
depicted here by one of the main characters.” The teacher might also ask students to include their own thoughts on that worldview and may ask students to share Scripture that relates, as well. The teacher should provide a rubric so that students know what level of analysis, personal reflection, etc. is required. This paper becomes an assessment or Part 1 of this process. The student is not graded on where they are in their spiritual journey. They are graded on whether they met the rubric requirements (identify, explain, illustrate, analyze, compare/contrast, etc.).

Assessment Part 2 - Analysis
The next part of the process is a compilation and analysis task for the teacher. The teacher is going to collect the student papers, note their responses, and include them in an assessment report for the year. Assuming this is the second assessment on this outcome, the teacher may see growth in how the students understand worldviews and explain their own understanding of the worldview in the story. A simple analysis might be that there is growth for a third or half of the class. However, the teacher might also note that two or three of the students are really struggling to understand what a worldview is or how they feel about this particular worldview (identifying significant differences between Christian and anti-Christian thought).

Assessment Part 3 – Follow Up
The final step is the follow-up for that teacher. If the class is growing and developing as expected, the teacher continues through the instructional activities as planned. If that is not the case for the whole class, then the teacher may need to reteach some aspect. If only two to three students struggle individually, the teacher may need to intervene with them. The struggle may be on the English/grammar side (putting into words what they are trying to say) or it may be in what they are expressing. The students may be confused or just not quite sure what the character was struggling with. They may also be grappling with their own worldview. This gives the teacher a wonderful one-on-one opportunity to follow up and mentor that young person. It starts with the assignment, of course, but the assessment provides an opportunity to help that student grow or at least articulate some doubts that may be plaguing them.

Part 3 also includes the development of a portfolio, or a record of the student’s growth. For the following year, as students move from one teacher to another, a written history is created of the journey that student is on. In many schools, a student that is struggling or doubting just slides unnoticed into the next grade and no one is aware of their thoughts. With a portfolio of spiritual development, the school has an “intentional” way of noticing and shepherding students through their spiritual journey. These are considered internal or informal assessments.

More Examples, Multiple Grade Levels
Service Opportunities

Some schools have an outcome related to service and missions, and possibly meeting the needs of the poor. In the past, eighth grade students at ABC Christian school have gone out into the community to rake leaves and clean up lawns for older citizens in a poor area of the neighborhood each fall. They have fun, come back for cider and cookies, and call it a day. Once the school started doing assessments of its outcomes, the teacher asked them to journal once a week about what Jesus says about poor people and what our reactions should be toward them. This went on for a month prior to the work in the community. The first week, students wrote out verses, provided short and shallow comments, and shared only briefly. The second and third week, the sharing started to increase. By the fourth week, students had discovered through their online searching how many verses there are about the poor and how many times Jesus himself speaks about our responsibility toward them. Students asked for more time to write, and the sharing went on much past the time allotted.
By the time the students went to the neighboring homes and served, the experience was substantially different than it had been in the past. When they came back, the students journaled and shared for most of the class period. Students also completed a short self-evaluation (a simple rubric) with their final journal reflection. This happened year after year. The teacher completed the class analysis for the assessment report (Part 2 above) and completed a follow-up with the class or individuals that seemed to struggle with these concepts (Part 2 above), again providing meaningful conversations.

### The Gospel

For another example, schools may have an outcome similar to…understands the gospel, salvation, and how to present that to others or pursues a personal relationship with Christ. Let’s look at how a teacher might teach and assess those in elementary through middle school.

In the elementary grades, the teacher may have an instructional activity in Bible class where students learn the plan of salvation and then demonstrate their knowledge. In second grade, students might use a bracelet or bookmark that has five colors. Students might create the item and then share the meaning with a small group or whole class. In fifth grade, students may have memorized parts of verses that connect with each of those five points, and students may use a poster as they explain why each of these points are important to the gospel story. The fifth graders might even choose different hypothetical audiences and indicate to whom they would be presenting this information. For both activities, the teacher would have a simple rubric that allows them to mark the student as to their understanding of the concepts. For the fifth grader, a follow-up entry in a journal might be appropriate such as “Today’s journal entry will give you an opportunity to write about your journey with Jesus. If you know that Jesus is your Savior, you can write about that. If you are still thinking about that, you can write about your questions. If you are not sure you are interested, you can write about your thoughts.” These journal entries become part of the portfolio that has been developed for each student to demonstrate the growth and development of their spiritual formation while they have been a student at the school.

An eighth-grade activity could take the form of a research paper and personal testimony. Each student could research their church’s position on their understanding of salvation and the verses they use to share the gospel. Then they could be asked to write out their personal testimony to present to the high school principal as they prepare to enter high school. This activity will provide the 8th grade Bible teacher a wonderful opportunity to meet individually with each student and talk through any doubts or questions they may have about their personal relationship with Christ.

This process of analysis and assessment is the basis for spiritual mentoring that is so valuable in the Christian school. In schools that have taken this approach, students have received Christ because of the intentional one-on-one conversations that naturally occur in these settings.

### Objective Assessments Involving Biblical Integration

Schools also ask about the objective assessment of biblical integration and if that can become part of spiritual formation assessment. Yes, it certainly can. Following are a couple of examples.

Hopefully, every unit has some biblical integration that addresses the content. For example, during a social studies unit, the teacher may teach the history concepts and discuss how a war or other events were significantly motivated by self-interest. The teacher could share Scriptural
and personal examples, explaining the motivators of behavior. During the unit exam, the student is given several events and asked to explain how this event was motivated by self-interest. The rubric for grading that essay question might require the inclusion of a biblical principle. The goal is for the student to articulate a clear understanding of the Christian perspective and/or worldview and not require them to express a view as their own just for grading purposes.

Another example may be from simple class functions or processes supporting learning. For example, a school may have an outcome similar to...is able to relate well and work well with others and respects the worth of every individual as made in God’s image. This type of assessment can come from general student observations throughout the year and documented through a basic rubric of the various traits.

As a school develops methods of spiritual formation assessment, a common language and system will be beneficial. Create expectations so that everyone works on this together. For example, teachers could create one or two assessments the first year and continue the process until all outcomes are covered. A final, important step would be to start small, but assemble these results into a more extensive assessment report for various divisions and review those results annually to determine improvement strategies and celebrate areas of impact.

**Conclusion**

In summary, it is important that spiritual formation assessment is:

- developmental, focused on growth and maturity, not judging students
- for the purpose of seeing students achieve the spiritual outcomes
- analyzed and used for program improvement, both at the whole class and individual level.

The school should be just as committed to achieving their non-academic outcomes as they are the typical academic outcomes. *Assessing the spiritual formation of students will yield demonstrable results and give teachers the tools they need to meet the needs of their students.*

**Notes for Exemplary Schools**

Exemplary schools have a higher standard for assessing spiritual formation. It is expected that an Exemplary school “conducts internal and external spiritual formation assessments of students, including both formative and summative assessments. External summative student spiritual formation assessments occur at least every other year.”

Schools often ask about what constitutes ‘external summative assessments.’ These involve a third-party assessment to help the school compare their results with benchmarks from other schools or expectations that have been provided from a group of schools. It is helpful to use these third-party measures for several years or periodically (like every other year) to provide a way to identify strengths and areas for spiritual growth.

When the school compares their goals or curriculum objectives to a particular spiritual formation assessment tool, the school may ascertain that the assessment may not fit well. They may decide to supplement the assessment with internal assessments, or more of a portfolio approach, as was described above. Other schools have used one or more third-party assessments and then developed their own, better aligned to their goals. These may be partially objective and contain internal or informal assessments. The informal assessment portions tend to be criterion-referenced or more reflective.
For some additional options for third-party spiritual assessments that schools have used, see the bibliography below. ACSI does not endorse any of these because what is most important is the fit between an assessment and your school’s desired outcomes. As stated earlier, the most significant aspect of the process is what your school does with the information it gathers. If you have one that you find works well in your school, please share it with us at accreditation@acsi.org. Also be sure to share it in the Accreditation Group in the Online Community. Others would love to hear about your experience.

ACSI’s Flourishing Faith Index
Stay tuned to ACSI’s ongoing research. ACSI’s Flourishing Faith Index (FFI) can also serve to assist schools in this area. The FFI builds upon ACSI’s groundbreaking work in developing the FSCI as a validated statistical tool specifically designed for gauging spiritual formation in K-12 Christian schools. While others have developed tools for measuring spiritual or biblical worldview formation, the FFI offers several important advantages as a tool developed in a K-12 Christian setting for practical application in K-12 Christian schools with comprehensive feedback from seven constituent groups in the school community.
References

Christian Character Index:  http://www.assess-yourself.org/


Flourishing Schools Culture Instrument:  https://www.acsi.org/professional-development/flourishing-schools-institute/flourishing-schools-home


Spiritual Transformation Inventory:  https://www.spiritualtransformation.org/