

# Dinner date

Focus on here-and-now tasks may cause us to lose sight of our educational tasks | *Joel Belz*

When I traveled a few days ago to western Pennsylvania to help a small Christian school launch a program to construct its very first building, I couldn't help thinking: "This is important! This is worthwhile." I was excited.

Just a few days after accepting the invitation to speak at the school's fundraising dinner, I had also been invited to spend the same evening at a political rally in another state. I was frankly glad that I had a good excuse. To spend another evening hearing political triteness seemed singularly unexciting.

But I ask you in this very political year: If you had to make a choice between spending all your spare time for the rest of 2008 as a political activist, or investing yourself in the education of a group of elementary or high-school students, which would you pick? Which would be likely to have the most enduring impact?

I happen to know—because I've studied WORLD's readership over the 22 years since we published our first issue—that it's likely you have a keen interest on both fronts. It's an illuminating discussion, and I urge you to imagine that you have to choose one or the other.

I worry that we evangelical Christians have become so distracted on the political front—perhaps even so panicked—that we may be losing our focus on the importance of the educational task. We get so consumed with the work of winning this year's election—of fine-tuning the here and now—that we forget what will be profoundly shaping political discourse 10, 20, and 30 years from now. We are tactical experts but strategically ignorant.

I say this in part against the backdrop of new statistics indicating that the rapid rise of Christian schooling over the last generation has radically leveled off. You probably heard through the 1980s the claim that a new Christian school was opening every single day. That

probably wasn't true even then—but the Association of Christian Schools International says now that every week at least one and perhaps two Christian schools are closing their doors.

One big reason for that sober report is the advent of homeschooling. While four major Christian school associations report a mostly steady total enrollment of just over 1 million students for the last two decades, there may be 1 million more children from Christian families studying in homeschool settings that were nonexistent a generation ago. Those students represent huge growth that might have, but didn't, take place in Christian schools.

But whatever statistical and fiscal readjustment that may have occasioned, traditional Christian schooling and homeschooling tend to be philosophical partners—not competitors.

And both are prone to stumble over the same issue. Both traditional Christian schooling and many Christian homeschoolers are tempted to suppose that one of their big challenges is to prove to all the world that the education they offer is just as good as—well, yes, just as good as what the state has to offer! And in the process of living up to that claim, they devalue their primary asset.

They lose their saltiness.

Christian education, whether in a school classroom or a homeschool setting, is noteworthy for the difference it makes—not for how well it imitates state education. And when a Christian school—or a homeschooling family—becomes imitative rather than distinctive at its core, it loses impact. Folks will ultimately look at such efforts and say: "Sorry. It's not worth it." Indeed, that's why a few me-too schools die every year.

But a school that knows why it's there (like the school I visited in Pennsylvania) and isn't scared to be distinctive has a big and important future. So big and so important, in fact, that I'd choose a fundraising dinner for a school over a political rally any day of the week.

As I said, you don't have to choose between Nov. 4, 2008, and what happens in 2028 and 2048. God has given you the freedom to be involved on both fronts. But in your zeal for your political task this year, don't forget to help equip the next generation's citizens as well to think—and even to vote—in a biblically directed and God-centered way.

*If you have a question or comment for Joel Belz, send it to [jbelz@worldmag.com](mailto:jbelz@worldmag.com)*

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