

# Adventist Education vs. Public Education *Weighed in the Balances*

## Which is Better?



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## Adventist Education vs. Public Education Weighed in the Balances *Which is Better?*

This article is placing Adventist education and public education in the balances. To some Seventh-day Adventist parents, there is no difference between Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) education vs. public education. Dr. Roger Dudley in his book *Why Our [Seventh-day Adventist] Teenagers Leave the Church*, page 78, reveals from his 10-year study that the third best predictor of whether or not a teenager will retain membership in the SDA church lies in the number of years the teenager attends a Seventh-day Adventist school—and that the more years the teenager is educated in a SDA school the greater the difference. He further states that between 40 and 50 percent of Adventist youth leave the church in their 20's. How can we keep them?

Statistics compiled by the General Conference of SDA Board of Regents indicate that:

- Only 30 percent of SDA youth from Adventist homes who are educated in public schools ever become baptized.
- 90 percent of SDA young people from Adventist homes who attend SDA schools become baptized members of the SDA church.

Despite these “rosy” statistics in support of Adventist education, the rising cost of attending a SDA school has caused some SDA parents and constituent members to ask, “Is there really any difference between SDA church education and public school education, and is the difference in cost really worth it?” To some SDA parents, the weight of evidence stands in favor of public school education—but is this the case? You decide. Let's begin with an interaction between a public school educator and a SDA educator.

**Public School Educator:** “We don't understand why you SDAs want a separate school system of Adventist education. Public education is more than adequate in meeting a student's educational needs. What makes your school system different from public schools?”

**SDA Educator:** “Since 1872, the SDA system of education has been commissioned by God to adhere to the Biblical mandate in **Isaiah 54:13 (KJV)** that states, ‘and all thy children shall be taught of the Lord.’ There are four goals that separate our school system from every public school in America:

1. “The **first goal** of Adventist education is the salvation of our children. The ultimate objective is to lead students to accept Jesus Christ.
2. “The **second goal** is to nurture our children in the Adventist culture. Although SDA children learn much of this at home and in church, those SDA youth who attend public school lose a major part of Adventist culture. Students in SDA schools are participating in activities to help them learn about their religious roots.
3. “The **third goal** is to place children and youth in a school in which that influence works cooperatively with the home and church to shape the child's life.
4. “The **fourth goal** is to train future church members, lay workers, Sabbath School teachers—and even General Conference presidents. If time lasts, tomorrow's church leaders can be found in the church school, academy, and SDA colleges of today.”

**Public School Educator:** “That’s all fine, but let’s compare and contrast your school facilities with that of a public school. Do you have adequate facilities such as large gymnasiums with regulation basketball courts, super-sized science labs and libraries stacked to the maximum with current reading resource materials, as well as large cafeterias, etc.? And how about programs for gifted and academically challenged students?”

**SDA Educator:** “Many of our schools do not have gymnasiums much less regulation basketball courts. Our science equipment may not even be ‘state-of-the-art,’ nor are our libraries ‘stacked to the max.’ Few of our schools even offer special programs for talented/gifted children or are equipped to handle students with severe disabilities. Despite the fact our facilities may not be on par with many public schools, 90 percent or more of our students go on to not just Adventist college/universities but many get in to other accredited college/universities, with the vast majority graduating from four-year institutions. This compares favorably with public school students in which less than 50 percent go on to college/universities.”

**Public School Educator:** “What then makes the Adventist school system so special to the point that the SDA church is willing to pump in millions of dollars every year to maintain an educational system that has become the largest Protestant parochial school system in the world? Is it your students who are different from public school students?”

**SDA Educator:** “No. Our students are very much like yours. Our students live in the same world and face the same challenges. Adventist schools are not ‘angel factories’ stamping ‘perfect’ on all who pass through its doors. No, the difference is not in our students, although many students who walk through our doors proclaim that attending a SDA school ‘turned their life around’ for the good, and since 2004 we have had the privilege of educating over 1,000,000 students annually at over 6000 schools!”

**Public School Educator:** “If the difference is not in your students, then it’s got to be your classes. It’s in what you study. The difference must be the SDA curriculum. Isn’t that it?”

**SDA Educator:** “Yes, there is a difference in our curriculum. We have Bible classes, and our science textbooks teach us about creation, and that each student was created in the image of God instead of through evolution. Our Adventist lifestyle is taught in our reading and health textbooks...but we also have a strong program in teaching the skills of reading, language, spelling, mathematics and other disciplines that are offered in public schools. In addition, SDA teachers integrate faith and learning experiences throughout the curriculum, and Jesus Christ is always integrated at the center of our curriculum. Our teachers find no compulsion to hinder heartfelt expressions of the Christ who walks the pages of history, give order and meaning to mathematics, and beauty and form to art, etc. But curriculum is not the greatest influence that separates an Adventist school from public school.”

**Public School Educator:** “Compared to public schools, how does the SDA school system rate on standardized achievement tests?”

**SDA Educator:** “Students who are part of the SDA school system as a whole are well above the national average. For instance, the 2006 graduating class from Greater New York Academy included 26 students—all graduated with a New York State Regents’ Diploma (the average for the state is less than 50 percent). Our students also perform well on the **Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)**, the **Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT)** and the **American College Test (ACT)** examinations. In fact, a current study of students attending SDA schools in North America shows the following:

- 1) Overall achievement on a national achievement test is above the national norm in **all** grades tested (grades 3-8 and 9 and 11) and in **all** subject areas tested.”
- 2) Students at all levels of ability, on average, have higher achievement scores than what would be predicted by their age and grade level. For more information, go to **[www.cognitivegenesis.org](http://www.cognitivegenesis.org)**.

**Public School Educator:** “But we have good schools with high achievement scores too.”

**SDA Educator:** “Right. So the difference in achievement scores is not the most important difference.”

**Public School Educator:** “All public schools are accredited. Are all SDA schools accredited?”

**SDA Educator:** “Yes. Each school is accredited through the Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities Inc. (AAA). In addition, just like public schools, each of our schools is approved to operate by a local accrediting association. Our accrediting standards have received national acclaim for the comprehensive manner in which Adventist schools determine the quality and effectiveness of the overall school program. The main purpose of our accreditation process, which typically takes place every four to six years through a visiting team of five to seven educators, is to conduct a comprehensive review of the total school program. As a part of this thorough assessment, a determination is made to make sure that the school is focusing on its mission, philosophy and goals, etc., as well as to provide areas needing improvement.”

**Public School Educator:** “What about your teachers? Are they trained? Are they certified? The majority of our teachers are.”

**SDA Educator:** “So are ours! SDA teachers go through a rigorous certification program in accordance with North American Division (NAD) certification standards. It is equivalent to state certification standards and includes an additional 15-20 hours in religion courses that are included as part of the certification process. In addition, our teachers take additional training through seminars, workshops, and graduate level classes—just like public school educators. Beyond the academic preparation, our teachers have one unique advantage over public school educators—they are committed to Jesus Christ and to the lifestyle that is unique to the SDA church. Our teachers are living examples of what we are striving to be. Every teacher upholds the Bible and the standards of the SDA church. Athletic events, concerts, and special parties are not planned for Friday nights or during Sabbath hours, and that’s a real plus for parents and students who desire to sacredly guard the Sabbath hours. The teacher is important, but it is not the only reason for having a separate school system.”

**Public School Educator:** “A survey appeared in the April 13, 1997 issue of *Newsweek* magazine indicating that the five most serious problems facing American public schools are drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, and rape. Do SDA schools face the same challenges?”

**SDA Educator:** “Absolutely not! The most serious challenges we face are talking in class, gum chewing, running in the halls, getting out of turn in line, and not wearing the school uniform. We praise God that our schools are safe. We feel that the daily presence of Jesus watching over our schools creates a safe haven for our children. Also, none of our schools have metal detectors to determine whether or not our children are bringing weapons to school. Our schools are not perfect, but none face the same serious challenges that many public schools face in the area of school safety.”

**Public School Educator:** “Is the SDA system of education comprised of K-12 grade levels only, or does it include schools of higher education?”

**SDA Educator:** “Just in the United States, there are over a dozen SDA colleges and universities. Most of them offer full undergraduate programs in a variety of subject areas, and many offer post-graduate degrees as well.”

**Public School Educator:** “I don’t get it. The difference is not in your physical plant, in your facilities nor is the difference in your students, and it’s only partly in the curriculum, and only partly in the teachers. So explain to me, because I’d like to know, what makes the **big** difference?”

**SDA Educator:** “Okay, I’ll tell you. It’s the presence of Jesus on each of our campuses.”

**Public School Educator:** “What does Jesus have to do with school? He belongs in heaven and in church but not in school.”

**SDA Educator:** “That’s the whole point. SDA schools are designed to put Jesus Christ at the center of the school program. Jesus Christ is the lifeblood of each of our schools. What makes our schools special is the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of each of our students. He is present in each classroom, on the playground, and in our classroom reading circle. In other words, His presence is felt daily in our school program. On a personal level, when students are confronted with special challenges, teachers pray with the students, and students feel the presence of Jesus during the morning worship, Weeks-of-Prayer, and in all school activities. The Holy Spirit is there to convict students when they do wrong. In one scenario, a student took money off a teacher’s desk. The students in the classroom and the teacher prayed about it, and the Holy Spirit helped convict the student of his misdeed, and he felt genuinely sorry for his action. (A wonderful victory in this student’s character development!) In addition, Bible classes and Adventist service activities such as neighborhood clean-ups and sending get-well cards to shut-ins, teach students about how they should live. The power of the Holy Spirit helps students maintain Adventist standards of deportment. Through a zero tolerance policy students are taught to abide by the principles identified in **Philippians 4:13 (NKJV)**, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,’ and in Ellen G. White’s book **Education**, ‘Godliness—Godlikeness—is the goal to be reached’ (p.18).”

## SUMMATION

What a difference Jesus makes in the Seventh-day Adventist system of education. We are thankful for our teachers who are called to Adventist service. We are thankful that the Holy Spirit transforms students’ hearts, and that Jesus Christ helps our students deal with daily challenges each student faces. There is a **big** difference between attending a SDA school and public school. The SDA system of education is distinctively different from any public school. Our **goals** are different; our **teachers** are different; our **curriculum** is different; our **methodology** is different; our **context** is different; and therefore, our **product**—the wonderful **boys** and **girls** that we educate are different. “Education is a failure unless the student has grasped the truths of divine revelation, and the heart accepts the teachings of Jesus Christ” (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p.536). We have weighed Adventist education and public education in the balances, and public education has been found wanting.

## PRAISE GOD FOR ADVENTIST EDUCATION!

## REFERENCES

1. Dudley, R. (2000). *Why Our Teenagers Leave The Church*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.
2. Watts, D. (2006). *Sabbath School Program Planner, Vol. 3*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.