



Napa Christian Campus of Education students gather via Zoom for class time. (Photo via the school's Facebook page)

# THE ADAPTIVE APPROACH:

## *The New Normal of Adventist Education*

BY HALLIE ANDERSON

COVID-19 has dramatically changed the world in a short amount of time. The places we work, play, eat, sleep, and learn have all been confined to one space lovingly referred to as home. One place has been especially rocked by this upheaval—the classroom.

Adventist schools everywhere in North America have closed temporarily, moving classes online. Teachers are instructing inside virtual classrooms. Students are home.

Figuring out how to run school this way is just the beginning of what is shaping up to be a logistical nightmare. Even when these final quarters and semesters of the 2019–2020 school year crawl to completion, the years to follow are uncertain. Enrollment will inevitably decline in private schools as parents face unexpected financial crisis. Faculty, staff, and management will lose their jobs as budgets and corners are cut to keep business running. Those who

remain will have larger workloads that could easily come with smaller paychecks. We are left with questions about what this means for Adventist schools facing uncharted territory. As we look to an uncertain future, many are wondering what this means for the Adventist education system.

The sustainability of Adventist schools was already in question before COVID-19 surfaced. Similar concerns about the future of Adventist education were presented to the North American Division when President Dan Jackson stated last fall at the NAD Year-end Meetings that 256 Adventist schools had closed in the last seven years. At the time, this information stood starkly against the many great selling points of why “Adventist Schools Work” listed on [adventisteducation.org](http://adventisteducation.org). Adventist schools come with an ideal student-teacher ratio, multifunctional classrooms with a family atmosphere, a spiritual focus, and an emphasis on community service. Furthermore, students excel academically in Adventist schools. According to CognitiveGenesis, a four-year (2006–2009) study on the academic abilities of students in Adventist schools and academies, “students in all grades, in Adventist schools of all sizes, outperformed the national average in all subjects.” There were 51,706 students who participated in the study, from more than 800 Adventist schools in the United States. Based on the findings, the Adventist school model is one that has the ability to produce leaders, overachievers, and deep thinkers. So why would there be an issue keeping them open?

I had a conversation with the NAD vice president of Education, Arne Nielsen, on the topic in early February, before COVID-19 had changed the discussion. None of us were talking short-term. Questions were about the next ten years of Adventist education, not the next ten weeks.

He was joined by his office staff, complete with Dr. Leisa Standish (Director of Elementary/Curriculum), Stephen Bralley (Director of Secondary Education/Accreditation), Evelyn Sullivan (Director of Early

Childhood/REACH), Martha Ban (Director of Technology and Support), and Desiree Bryant (Assistant Director, Project Manager). We began with numbers.

The conversation was first directed to Martha Ban, the expert on data. She explained how data for Adventist schools is gathered and tracked, saying that each school is assigned an organizational ID through [eAdventist.org](http://eAdventist.org). When a school opens, it receives an ID and is marked “active.” When a school is closed, it is marked “inactive.” But it is not necessarily that cut and dried. “For years we had elementary schools and academies on the same campus with two different principals,” she explained. “So as the administrative model changed to have one principal over both campuses, the organizational IDs would reflect that.” Essentially, one school being marked as “inactive” does not necessarily mean a loss of students or even a campus.

However, there is no denying that schools have closed their doors in a more literal sense in the last several years. Nielsen explained that many of these campuses were one-teacher elementary schools where enrollment had dissipated almost entirely. Other schools that have closed are boarding schools as parents are no longer as likely to send their kids away for high school.

“You can’t really discredit data,” Vice President Arne Nielsen stated.

So the data does show that we’ve closed a lot of schools. If that can be our starting point, we would like to suggest to you that Adventist education is in a place right now where we feel that we have turned a corner on school closings. We are actually starting to open schools. It is not unusual for us to open one to four schools every year.

While breaking down these numbers and understanding the data was clarifying, it is not lost on

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anyone that the landscape of Adventist education—and Adventism as a whole—has changed.

“In the 70s and 80s, we were bursting at the seams in Adventist education. The population of Adventists was great at the time,” said Nielsen. He recounted the well-known fact that families in North America are having fewer children as a generation, meaning there are fewer students altogether.

In addition to population, Nielsen explored other factors contributing to the shift in numbers we see in our schools. Closing an Adventist hospital or moving a conference office will impact the Adventist population of a community as people relocate. The demographics of Adventism have changed, too, as we see more immigrant groups coming to the United States and becoming an integral part of the church. These groups are not always

financially able to send their children to private schools. “The change in demographic has had some impact,” Nielsen stated. Others still have opted to homeschool their children, numbers not reflected in the statistics that count how many children are in Adventist schools.

It is not all bad, and it is not all good. That is the general takeaway from the endless conversation there could be on the topic of enrollment. We know what Adventist education used to look like and we know it has changed. We know parents have a wide range of options and that many personal factors weigh into their decision-making when choosing a school. What we are left with is the question of what this means for the future of Adventist education.

“That story has yet to be written,” Stephen Bralley contributed. “It’s not that there aren’t concerns. There



Parents and kids decorated their cars to show how much they love their teachers and school while picking up their resources for distance schooling due to COVID-19. (Photo from Leisa Morton-Standish)

are. Adventist education is different than it was in the fifties, sixties, seventies, and it's well past time to begin to grapple with those changes in the church in general, not just in education," he continued. "I will say I don't believe it will look the same. It must change in some ways."

Dr. Leisa Standish, originally from Australia, agreed with Bralley. She explained that there are changes happening elsewhere and change is possible. "Our schools are thriving in the South Pacific, but they're 70%–95% non-Adventist," she shared. "They're serving a 'missional' purpose within the church." She is hopeful this will happen in North America, too, as there is a growing intentional effort of reaching the communities where schools reside.

This intentional reaching in and of itself is not a new concept in the Adventist church; it is actually quite foundational. Bralley explained the idea of "spheres of influence," the cornerstones of work the Adventist church does: healthcare, education, church. "We're looking at the original intent of our health message, and education, and church and using all three when we go into a community to reach the everyday perceived needs of that community and begin to create a relationship before we even get deep into theology," said Bralley.

The NAD Office of Education has been working to make these intentions a new reality. Nielsen shared that there is "behind the scenes" work being done to set foundational next steps. "We're hoping to roll that out in February of 2021 to all of our leaders and our educators across the division. We do have a big vision and we do have a foundation that's a work in progress right now," he stated. Upon hearing that, I said that it was good to hear that it does not seem that the church's commitment to Adventist education is being set aside. He agreed. "I would take it a step further. Our pastors at the seminary at Andrews are taking a course in Adventist education. It's a course they've never had before but has been in place now for the last couple of years." He continued to say that this supports the symbiotic relationship schools and churches need. "We're strengthening our partnerships. We're thankful for that."

Other intentional changes and focuses are in the works, too. With students either homeschooling or going to the many other school options available (both private and public), the product Adventist education is offering must be top-notch. "It's really on us to make sure we

## ZOOMING IN *and Branching Out*

In an effort to provide a close-up view of what forward-thinking leadership looks like inside an Adventist school, another conversation was also started in February with Principal Matthew Jakobsons and grades 7–12 Vice Principal Tonja Rasmusson of Sacramento Adventist Academy. SAA is a K-12 Adventist school, equipped with forty-eight full-time and part-time faculty and staff members who are teaching 334 K-12 students and twenty-eight preschoolers. SAA is nestled in Northern California with Adventist Health and the Northern California Conference SDA headquarters nearby. While they are in a fortunate market, their real strength lies in visionary leadership. Their goal is to offer quality, Christ-centered education that encourages collaboration and embraces trying new things.

SAA, like many Adventist K-12 schools, is not standing alone. In the Sacramento Valley, several Adventist schools share the region within reasonable proximity. They also share families, friends, church members, and even zip codes. Rather than competing, Jakobsons views this as an opportunity for partnership and a chance to capitalize on resources. He believes Adventist education can be "bigger than brick and mortar schools," and that in sharing communities, there is the opportunity to better link kids together, creating "hubs" with focused strong points. He said, "We can connect ourselves as believers in Jesus, ready to work together."

When students were no longer meeting in those brick and mortar buildings, the conversation changed but the objectives did not. Rather than feeling their dreams of bringing people together were no longer possible, Jakobsons and Rasmusson were only further inspired.

"We have to ask ourselves, 'Where's the silver lining?'" Jakobsons says. "Perspective is everything."

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For SAA, the silver lining has been witnessing the school's ability to quickly adapt in these times. Their sights are set on how to get back in the classroom, equipped with the new tools they are mastering now.

"We can take these skills we are learning now back with us into the regular school years ahead," Rasmusson added. In action, that could look like a student from one Adventist school tuning in virtually for a class only offered at another Adventist school. Jakobsons and Rasmusson said they had "already started those conversations" well before March and are now even more excited about the possibilities. The opportunity would be especially useful for making AP classes more widely available. Jakobsons said that this "dive" into the COVID-19 digital era has only further "created talking points."

Adventist schools have partnered before when it comes to sports tournaments and band festivals, but the potential to connect kids within the classroom remains largely untapped. Jakobsons says they hope to inspire other schools to look to the future possibilities and to use their technical talents as an opportunity to "strengthen not just Adventist schools individually but as a collective system."

Similar discussions are happening higher up at the conference levels, too. Albert Miller is the Superintendent of Schools for the Northern California Conference, the conference that oversees SAA. Miller noted there are some positives of distance learning they hope schools take into the future. Right now, educators from all over the conference are invited to join an optional weekly meeting via Zoom to share their ideas and talk about what approaches and lessons have worked best in the new environment so far. In those dialogues, ideas have been thrown around about the possibility of virtual, conference-wide science fairs and spelling bees when distance learning subsides. As teachers and students master video conferencing and online meetings, they are creating future opportunities to connect with each other. The schools that will do it successfully will be the ones willing to keep stretching themselves.

have quality education," Nielsen said adamantly. That quality education is recognized through a comprehensive accreditation process and by offering excellence in curriculum that is competitive.

If that excellence is experienced early on, it is more likely to be worth staying for. To that end is another effort currently being put forth by the NAD—early childhood education. Nielsen called it "a new responsibility" that will grow Adventist education.

Evelyn Sullivan, a champion of early childhood education in the NAD, agreed with those sentiments. "The foundation years are very important and what we have done within the NAD is we have brought in our early childhood programs and we've started many pre-K classrooms." She explained that this "bridges a gap," connecting early years to primary and on to secondary. "It's a complete package."

The numbers show this to be a worthwhile effort after a study in Florida that, according to Nielsen, found 50% of students who were put in early childhood programs continued in Adventist education. He interpreted this as an indicator of the power and importance of the early childhood programs to the school system, providing something for parents very early on.

Nielsen concluded the conversation with a relevant quote from Ellen White's *Education*, page 296. White was writing about the purpose of an Adventist education as it directs students to a higher calling and a lasting relationship with Christ. It begins with "Something better" is the watchword of education, the law of all true living."

Something better. Nielsen builds on this concept. "Our focus right now as an Office and with our union directors is to search for something better in Adventist education. You're going to hear that theme as time goes on."

Time hardly had a chance to go on before COVID-19 became the biggest obstacle that needed addressing. Within one month of that February 11 conversation with the NAD Office of Education, the virus had turned the world upside-down. Quickly. The [adventisteducation.org](http://adventisteducation.org) website now displays a large pop-up alert that reads "Important Coronavirus COVID-19 Information and Recommendations." Click on it and it takes you to a "collection of resources and information for schools and



Napa Christian Campus staff pack Project Based Learning boxes and pray together before delivering boxes to students' homes.

communities to use in the ongoing response and efforts in preventing and slowing the spread of this serious disease.” Tabs include links to nationwide school closure maps, helpful instructions for teachers and pastors experiencing a digital learning curve, communication templates for schools to use for consistent and accurate wording, and AdventHealth’s extensive “Coronavirus Resource Hub.”

School is a computer-generated experience now as class is conducted via the Internet. Staff and students alike experience full days of phone calls, emails, and online classes and meetings using multimedia video communication services. Teachers have learned how to use Zoom, Google Classroom, Seesaw, and whatever else it takes to make school happen. Assignments are submitted digitally and assessments are administered virtually. In an unimaginable time, administrators from the top down have had to put on a brave face.

I had the opportunity to speak with the division’s education leaders again on April 9, and Dr. Leisa Standish spoke of how administrators, parents, and teachers are all handling this unexpected transition.

“Adventist Education is committed to continuing to

provide excellence in education whether it is in a brick and mortar building or distance education,” Standish states. “Our teachers have risen to this challenge and the response has been outstanding. In fact, we had some

Adventist schools that closed on Friday, March 13 and were delivering distance education to their students on Monday, March 16.”

Teachers across North America strive to keep the classroom a tangible, creative, and Christ-centered experience for their students. She expounds, saying they “have continued to engage their students in regular worships,

Bible study, prayer, chapel and one-on-one support.” Students continue to learn all materials they would normally find in their classrooms, including the recently launched Bible Encounter curriculum which has been a foundational part of their day. “The love and nurture our students get every day in school has been seen in so many ways by our school families.”

The North American Division Office of Education says they are impressed with their teachers and administrators who are continually “showing wisdom and

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courage as they meet this challenge head on,” an answer to their prayers. Standish shared two examples of how Adventist schools are trying to meet the challenges of distance learning with inventiveness.

Napa Christian Campus teachers in Napa, California, have been using “project-based learning to continue distance learning though the end of the school year.” Standish further explains, “Each student receives a box in the mail from the school with materials to complete their tasks. This is a real-life project that integrates all the subject areas and engages the children in the learning experiences.” While communication is largely virtual, learning is hands-on.

Forest Lake Academy students in Apopka, Florida, have paired their education with efforts to combat COVID-19 itself by partnering with Mass General Brigham Center for COVID Innovation to 3-D print N95 masks and protective face shields. The innovative masks are “designed by a team of biomedical engineers at the Medical University of South Carolina.” According to Standish, one Forest Lake Academy student put it best:

“We are using what we have learned in the innovation lab at FLA along with the talents God has provided to make a difference for the people who need it most.”

Administrators at the division level have been flooded with stories of how Adventist schools have come together to continue to provide education for their students. And while administrators are happy with results so far, they also acknowledge an opportunity to continue preparing educators for times such as this. Professional development and training are being scheduled for this summer, such as Burman University’s online course “Educational Change During Time of Crisis.”

All the resources these schools need to make distance learning successful are not cheap. Adequate technology must be made available to all students and their teachers. In a brief conversation with Albert Miller, Superintendent

of Schools for the Northern California Conference, it was stated that sixty-five students in the conference alone were initially without the devices they needed to connect with their teachers. Miller mentioned the conference recently received funding from the Pacific Union Conference to help in instances like this. This funding will make it possible to provide Chromebooks for students without a computer, laptop, or smartphone to access resources like Google Classroom and Zoom. This kind of financial support that conferences and unions can offer their schools can come from an unlikely source. For instance, the Gulf States

Conference qualified for government funding to help pay school employees. One school, Hoover Christian School in Alabama, received over \$60,000 thanks to the timely assistance.

Adventist schools carry onward, reliant on the investment of many. “We have funding partners that continue to support our schools in unprecedented ways,” NAD Vice President Arne Nielsen shares. “Versacare just provided \$1.4 million dollars in STEM equipment for our schools, two other foundations provided much-needed funds for small schools to purchase Chromebooks, and SFFC continues to provide scholarships for our students.”

Among those generous supporters counted are people who sponsor children attending Adventist schools, parents who sacrifice to make an Adventist education part of their child’s life, and members of the church who “faithfully pray and remember Adventist education in their personal giving.” He asks and answers,

Is it making a difference? Absolutely. Our schools are providing high-quality, distinctly Adventist education, we have dedicated teachers who nurture and support our students and bring them daily to the feet of Jesus, we have committed administrators who are continually strategically planning and making data-driven and spiritually-enriching decisions, and we have leadership who are looking to our Adventist



Napa Christian Campus student gets messy with another Project Based Learning box. (Photo from Leisa Morton-Standish)

heritage to follow our God-given charter while driving Adventist education strategically in curriculum, instruction and assessment.

While this past month of pivoting has been a tremendous achievement for Adventist schools, continued help from believers is critical. The weight of these unprecedented times is felt and shouldered by educators who miss their school families and students who need their classroom. The consequences of the COVID-19 era will ripple out to affect much more than just these final months of one school year, and help is needed if Adventist schools are to withstand it all.

“We also want our supporters to know that we continue to need their prayers, that our families need and appreciate their financial support, and that if they feel impressed to know what more they can do that they visit our [adventisteducation.org](http://adventisteducation.org) website and go to our project page to make a sustainable difference in the life of a child.” Nielsen continues, asking on behalf of the administrators and the students they serve:

We need dedicated Adventists to financially support our schools to meet and beat this COVID-19 crisis. Our early leaders in the Adventist church knew how important our institutions are. When our church was small, was poor, was relatively uneducated and was struggling to make ends meet—they went forward in faith to start schools, hospitals, colleges, and missionary outposts. We need to have that same faith to meet this crisis. If we follow God’s leading and meet it together, God has promised to bless us. He loves His children.

He concludes, “We implore our supporters that the time is now to pull together in faith and in financial support to continue our great tradition of Adventist Education.”

The future cannot be predicted but it can be affected. The plans and people put in place to guide Adventist education must be nimble yet firmly focused with goals and the means to achieve them. Whether leaders are striving to improve the next ten years, ten months, or even ten days of Adventist education, this much is clear:



Desmond Doss School student prays together with classmates using an iPad.  
(Photo from Leisa Morton-Standish)

an adaptive attitude and an honest acknowledgment of the need to create something better is the only way to reclaim an Adventist education system that thrives, not just survives.



**HALLIE ANDERSON** is a freelance marketing and communications specialist based in the foothills of Northern California. After studying journalism and public relations, she graduated in 2017 from Walla Walla University where she found her passion for storytelling.