

## ***Toward a Blueprint for a Model Christian School as an Integral Component in Community Transformation...***

The “Centro Educativo Amor y Esperanza”, operated by the “Fundación Amor y Esperanza” in Carmen Bajo has the potential to provide the template for replication across other communities in Ecuador and throughout Latin America. This school ministry is envisioned to serve as a model in other poor and marginalized communities because “if it can work in Carmen Bajo, it can work anywhere!”

Christian schooling is a strategic component of the foundation’s mission of community transformation in poor and marginalized communities. Community transformation initiatives must consist of an integrated approach that includes education, economic, health, and spiritual development. The Christian school is a direct and primary contributor to two of the essential components of this strategy – education and spiritual development.

The Christian school’s ministry, properly designed and administered, does what the secular school cannot, in that it demonstrates the full integration of the redemptive, restorative, and transformational reality of the Gospel in the spiritual and personal formation of the individual, in support of the family, and in contribution to the community.

Current Strengths: Assessment, community feedback, and demand for enrollment suggest that the leadership and staff at the school are filling a huge void in the community, despite limited financial and professional resources. The foundation’s school serves the needs of the community through the day-care facilities for infants and quality education for many children in the community. This contribution must not be underestimated, as most of the families have no other means of accessing these services.

In addition to the educational and child-care services, the school provides nutritional services to the children, contributing to their health and development in ways that their families cannot. As Dr. Salguero-Schmidt observed in her report, “the school is a respite for the children...” The school offers “a safe, very clean, well-lit, and well-ventilated environment.”

Dr. Salguero-Schmidt’s report listed three areas of strength in the school:

1. A strong academic program: She reported that the children are challenged to excel intellectually and academically. The integration of faith and learning is also evident at all levels in the school.
2. A quality teaching staff: The teachers were recognized as dedicated people who truly “care about the students and their lives” despite poorer compensation than they would receive in other schools. The teachers are involved in professional development and apply what they are learning.
3. An emphasis on Christian training: The students are immersed in a Christian atmosphere and they are taught to pray and to look at their studies from a Christian perspective. After observing the teachers and the children, Sandy concluded that “the love of Jesus Christ is definitely alive in this school!”

Comparisons: Assessment and analysis of the relative quality, value, and accessibility of the Christian education offered by the foundation’s school and that of the public school options available to children from the community suggests that there is no comparison. This context is entirely different than that of Christian schools in the United States, so one must be careful in challenging or validating the investment of funds and efforts in the Christian school as a component of the broader community transformation initiatives. There is no better way to

bring transformation to the child than through accessible, affordable, quality Christian education. And, through the children, families and the community are impacted.

The typical child or young person in Carmen Bajo does not have easy access to public education. Many would have no access to formal school at all if it were not for the foundation's school. Even for those students who could find a means of attending a public school, the costs are similar to those of the foundation's school, especially once transportation and food costs are considered, and the quality is inferior.

Characteristics of the public school in the area include a poorly maintained physical plant (impacting health, safety, and instructional environment), inappropriately large school and class sizes, absence of structure and discipline, lack of effective adult supervision, etc. A sponsored child in one of the public schools in this sector of Quito would not only fail to receive the vital Christian influence and formation provided by the Christian school, but they would study in a radically inferior learning environment.

Room for improvement: While the school in Carmen Bajo is undoubtedly of higher quality than the other schooling options available to the families in the community, the foundation is committed to optimizing the quality and scope of the school's ministry and then to replicate the model in other poor and marginalized communities in the region. Identification of areas for improvement is not an expression or reflection of weakness or failure. Rather, a school which is not intent on improvement will invariably decline in effectiveness.

Despite substantial support and resources from churches and educators in the United States and from the Alliance Academy International, in Quito, there is a need for such assistance to be focused and responsive to identified priorities, in accordance with a comprehensive and cohesive strategic plan. The report prepared by Dr. Sandy Salguero-Schmidt, of Greenville College, provides a substantial foundation for planning which must take place in order to establish and implement a long-range improvement plan for the school. If the vision and dream of replication of the ministry in Carmen Bajo is viable, the school's ministry must be strengthened.

The following areas have been identified as needing improvement in order for the foundation's mission and vision to be realized:

1. Qualified instructional and organizational leadership
  - (a) It is vital that a qualified school director be placed in the school, in part to assure purposeful and ongoing instructional and programmatic improvement, but also to release the current director to invest time in other vital aspects of the overall community transformation model. It is believed that a new director should share the passion and entrepreneurial initiative of the current leadership, but should also be a seasoned administrator.
  - (b) As the high school is developed, there will be a need for a principal to work with the secondary students. In addition, consideration must be given to securing the services of a guidance counselor and other non-instructional support staff. The absence of such support will compromise the school's potential to effectively prepare and launch the graduates into their next level of endeavor.
2. Targeted and systematic professional staff development: A three-year, cyclical and spiralling training program for the instructional staff is recommended in order to respond to current and projected needs, while permitting for new staff to be quickly and effectively integrated into the school's philosophical and instructional structure. This program should include elements such as those suggested by Dr. Salguero-Schmidt as well as elements related to the understanding and implementation of a Christian

philosophy of education. We continue to work on the structuring of a plan which is expected to include the following components, many of which are addressed in Sandy's report:

- (a) Goals and objectives for the professional development program.
- (b) Nature and extent of needed professional development.
- (c) Prioritized programs, courses, and/or areas of focus needed for teachers.
- (d) Parameters for when and how services should be delivered.
- (e) Assessments of professional growth.

3. Systematic and informed program and curriculum development and implementation. It was also hoped that the report on program and curriculum development would be ready to present to the Educational Advisory Board, but it is not yet ready. We are working on the development of a five-year curriculum development and review cycle, to include a textbook review and selection process, contemplating the following:

- (a) Adequacy and appropriateness of current curriculum materials (i.e., text books, teacher materials, student workbooks, and ancillary materials).
- (b) Technology resources and needs.
- (c) Assessment instruments and how and when testing should be administered.
- (d) Evaluation of the curricular program and delivery of instruction.

There are aspects of the school's program and services that should be carefully reviewed, in light of the delicate balance and tension between vision and financial realities. These include such aspects as:

- (a) Bi-lingual Emphasis: If this is to be a goal of the program, then there are implications for recruitment of qualified teachers fluent in English (preferably native English-speakers) to enhance effective language acquisition.
- (b) Screening Procedures: In order to either limit enrollment to students who can be successful in the program without special assistance, or to identify students with learning disabilities, screening procedures need to be instituted. If students with learning disabilities are accepted, then there should be staffing and program modifications and accommodations in place to assure that their needs are met.
- (c) Servicing personal and emotional needs: The services of an educational psychologist would be of great value in responding to the common and unique needs of students in this community, including those provoked by various forms of abuse and neglect.

4. Physical facilities: The school needs more space in order to meet the needs of the current student population and to continue expansion. Additional classrooms and eventually a new building must be secured for the school to continue in its trajectory of meeting the educational and spiritual formation needs of the children. In addition to classrooms, there is need for improved facilities for the day-care centers, a school library, and accessible physical education facilities.

### Non-Institutional Recommendations

1. Fundraising: The foundation in the U.S. should focus primarily on cultivation of committed donors, rather than traditional event-centered "fundraising." Fundraising tends to be labor-intensive and the return is not typically sustainable. "Friend-raising" or cultivation of committed donors is considered to provide a better financial return, greater connection and ownership, and sustainability. While the foundation in Ecuador may feel pressured to focus more on events for fundraising, as the economic and political climate does not encourage or substantially reward philanthropy, a handful of committed, sustaining

donors can quickly outperform high intensity and exhausting fundraising events. And, as individuals, couples, and businesses come into relationship and partnership with the foundation, they will expand the prayer support and sphere of influence of the foundation.

2. **Micro-enterprise:** The development of economic solutions in the community which integrate well with the school are imperative. Improved economic circumstances for school families will translate into an expanded ability for families to contribute more substantially to the educational costs of their children. There is a need to keep the community's limited financial resources in the community while expanding the entrepreneurial enterprises into the surrounding areas.
3. **Sphere's of Influence:** Every partner in the foundation's ministry should be challenged to utilize their personal and professional sphere of influence, identify those who can contribute time, talent, prayer covering, finances, etc. The potential impact of this ripple effect cannot be underestimated. One's sphere of influence may include family members, neighbors, co-workers, fellow congregants at church, service providers, business colleagues or clients, etc.
4. **ACSI Schools and Christian Colleges:** Through the ACSI article on the preschool program, the visit of Dr. Salguero-Schmidt from Greenville College, and public relations initiatives, the foundation will become known within the Christian school and Christian college community in the United States. This potential should be exploited. There is a significant movement in such schools and colleges to connect and partner with overseas national schools, providing financial project support, work and ministry teams, and student sponsorship initiatives.