

Should Your Christian School Enroll the Child of a Same-Sex Couple?

By Ken Coley, EdD, Director of Doctor of Education Program, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Swimmers are warned about the twin dangers of powerful waves and the counter sweep of strong undertow. When one ignores these warnings and ventures out into treacherous surf without sufficient preparation, he does so at his own peril. And so it is with many Christian school leaders who are innocently frolicking in the currents of cultural change ... oblivious to the growing number of requests by same-sex couples for the enrollment of their children in a local Christian school and unmindful of the potential for legal remedies if the school fails to meet their expectations. The lifeguards have put out the red pennants signifying rough surf. Consider yourself warned ...

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16, NIV). What a compelling command! Jesus knew that His disciples then, and that we now, would face incredible dilemmas knotted with strains of complexity ... and so it is as we consider the temporal and the eternal, the individual and the community, the short-term and the longer view of the issue at hand in this article—Should a Christian school enroll a student who comes from a household of a same-sex couple? One school made national news with its decision to deny a student admission ...

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Hope Christian School denied the admission of [a] three-year-old pre-school student, who has two fathers, and sent a letter to the parents explaining their reasoning. According to a local ABC affiliate (www.koat.com), Hope Christian School believes that homosexuality is inconsistent with the teachings of the school.

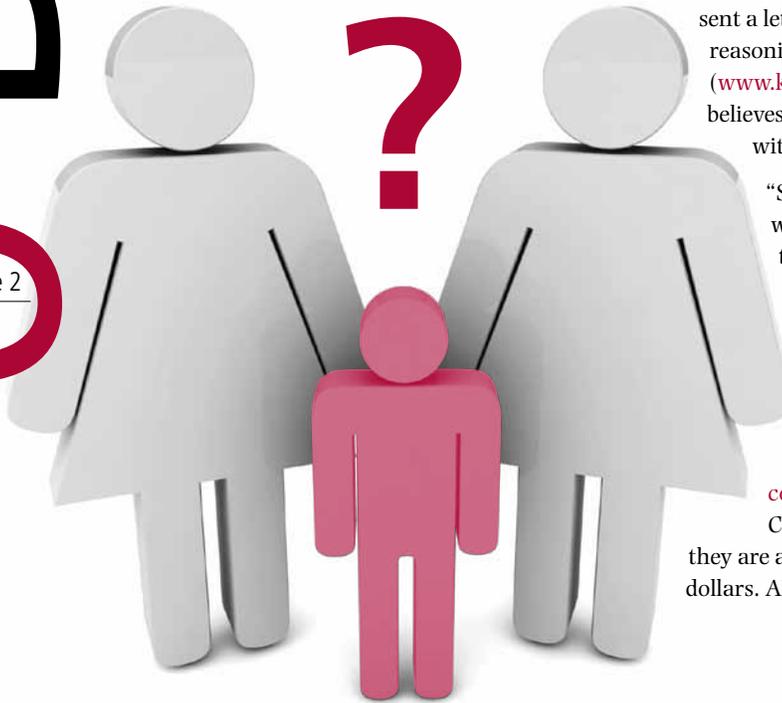
“Same gender couples are inconsistent with scriptural lifestyle and biblical teachings ... Home life doesn’t reflect the school’s belief of what a biblical family lifestyle is.”

The school states that since they are private, they are excused from “government interference in matters of religion (www.examiner.com/religion).” While the Hope Christian School is a private school, they are also partially funded by taxpayer dollars. ABC notes (www.koat.com) that the

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ACSI Vision Statement

ACSI will become a leading international organization that promotes Christian education and provides training and resources to Christian schools and Christian educators, resulting in

- schools that contribute to the public good through effective teaching and learning and that are biblically sound, academically rigorous, socially engaged, and culturally relevant and
- educators who embody a biblical worldview, engage in transformational teaching and discipling, and embrace personal and professional growth.

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As a member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), ACSI follows high standards of Christian ethics in

financial accounting and reporting—standards that help set us apart from other ministries. ECFA is an alliance of more than 1,100 evangelical ministries dedicated to honest accounting, financial integrity, and good stewardship.

Hope Christian School will receive as much as \$60,000 in taxpayer funds, which will be used for "educator professional development." ("Christian School Rejects Student Because of Gay Parents, Receives Taxpayer Money" by Robert Sobel, July 29, 2012, www.examiner.com)

Yes, this is an issue in which we can become quickly entangled by the tensions that encompass this conflict. This article presents a fresh look at what some of your fellow administrators are thinking and doing as they face difficult situations with Christlike compassion.

As you look at the survey results below and reflect on your own school's vulnerability in this matter, consider these checkpoints:

- *Clarity of thought and intention.* As the leader, do I have a clear picture of what the Lord has called our school to do, and is it reflected in our mission statement?
- *Clarity of communication.* Have we disseminated unambiguous documents to all our constituents?
- *Consistency of practice.* Do we have integrity in our dealings?
- *Overall culture that is tied to biblical understanding.* As our school encounters conflict with people outside our learning community, is there a set of core values that influence our stakeholders' thinking and reactions? Are their reactions in harmony with the school leaders' decision making?

An Investigation to Discover Current Practice

Each summer, administrators from ACSI schools across the country gather for Leadership Academy (LA) in Colorado Springs. At the most recent conference in July 2012, a one-page survey was distributed to all attendees. The mixed-method instrument was developed for the purpose of ascertaining current practice in the schools represented at LA. Sixty-six questionnaires were returned to this researcher. No demographic information was requested, so no correlations could be examined related to location, age of school, size of school, and so on. Two of the five questions requested *yes* or *no* responses, and one asked for a Likert-scale response (N=66). Following these questions, I asked for qualitative, short-answer responses to three statements:

- Scripture or doctrinal ideas that our school believes apply to this discussion are ...
- As the leader, my biggest fear or concern in considering accepting a student from a same-sex household would be ...
- If a current student's family structure changed to become a same-sex marriage structure, our school would respond by ...

Some of the Findings

- *Schools all over the nation are being approached by same-sex couples and asked to make a decision related to enrollment.* Seventeen respondents out of 66 have encountered this situation. This can be further broken down: ten administrators have had one or two occurrences, while four report having between three to five requests. Seven of the requests came within the last three years, five between 2009 and 2011 and two during the years 2004 and 2006. (Are you still thinking, "I will not have to deal with this issue"?)
- *Schools are responding in different ways.* In response to "It is my understanding that our school would respond to the request by a same-sex couple to enroll their child by ..." 13 respondents said that the child would be allowed to enroll if he or she met all other requirements. Thirty-five responded that the child would be denied enrollment for this specific reason. Thirteen indicated that they were unsure of how the school would respond. Combining responses for choice A and choice C, 26 out of 61 responses for this question indicate that they either have decided to receive these children or are unsure about their position.

- *Some schools have existing policies regarding this issue, and some do not.* Fourteen of the 57 respondents indicated that they have a policy regarding this issue. However, 43 respondents, or 75 percent, do not have an admission policy. That is of major concern, and I will discuss it at the close of this article.
- *Schools boards have approached this issue in a variety of ways.* According to the administrators who responded, and consistent with the previous question about the existence of a policy, 62 percent reported that their school board had never reviewed this issue. Another 5 (or 8 percent) reported that their school board considers admission policies an area that should be left to administrators. Three (5 percent) said that the board had discussed the topic but had taken no action. Once again, this is of major concern.

One administrator provided this snapshot of their discussion:

We are an outreach school and allow non-Christians to enroll if they understand that we will teach the gospel and biblical truth. Our board wrestled with this as we care for the child's (and parents') salvation. However, we were concerned about the political agenda of this parent, i.e., if student's parent would sue the school if we denied enrollment. Thus, we reviewed and further clarified our morality statements in our Parent/Student Handbook. But in general, we struggled with ideas of fact that we wouldn't deny enrollment for a family whose parents are Muslim. But we would for a same-sex couple. It came down to behavior affecting school. If a Muslim parent bowed and prayed to Mecca on school campus we would have to stop it; likewise, if same-sex couple were holding hands on campus, we would have to prevent that."

(The school does *not* support enrolling the child of a same-sex couple, according to their survey.)

- *The opportunity for the salvation of the child is paramount in the decision-making equation of some leaders.* Eighteen respondents said that they *strongly agree* with the above statement that was followed by a Likert scale of five choices—strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree, and strongly disagree. However, this does not necessarily mean that in every case this concern translates into the permission for a child in this situation to be enrolled. When this category is added to the 10 responses for *agree*, the survey reveals a high level of concern (over 47 percent) for the salvation of children through Christian education.

Short Responses Recorded in the Survey

The majority of those surveyed chose to respond to the open-ended statements. Here is a summary of what we can learn from the variety of perspectives represented in the sample.

Biblical Perspectives

As the statistics already presented reveal, a majority of those questioned would not allow the couple in question to enroll their child. When asked about any Scripture or doctrine that influences their position, the responses clustered into the following statements:

- The consistent model of Christian marriage is established in Genesis: one man and one woman.
- The Bible presents consistent teaching against gay lifestyle throughout the Old and New Testaments.
- A discipleship school would not accept the child from a family that is in open opposition to biblical standards.
- A covenantal school that requires the testimony of at least one believing parent finds this inconsistent with a Christian testimony.
- Doctrines related to unity of purpose ("Do not be unequally yoked") are opposed to open expression of this lifestyle that is in opposition to a school's teachings.

A superintendent at an ACSI school posted this perspective on ConNEXUS (reprinted with permission):

How do we assist parents in the training of their children when we are diametrically opposed in the matter of the family and purity which strike at the heart of biblical truth and our core values? How do we join hands with this family on one hand, while in the classroom we teach biblical truth that is the antithesis of what the children experience every day in their own homes? It is not about them staying away, or fighting to keep them out, or being a witness as a believer.... At our school, it is our desire to form a partnership, a fellowship with the parents.

Fellowship means "to have in common." We want to become an extension of the home and its values. This partnership is not possible when we have family values that are contrary to the biblical core values of the ministry. We cannot truly "assist these parents" in the fulfillment of our ministry.

Those That Would Approve Enrollment

Several referred to Matthew 19:14: "Allow the children to come to me" (CEB). Some referred to doctrines related to evangelism: "We are an open campus, John 3:16." The doctrine of *imago dei* was also referred to. This doctrine introduced in Genesis motivates the school to cherish each child and regain that which is lost. One administrator wrote, "Our school strongly supports the idea that marriage is between a man and a woman. The applicants would be told unashamedly that this is taught as truth and that same-sex couples are living in sin, but Scripture is clear to love the sinner and hate the sin, so yes we would accept the child to be able to present the truth to them."

Administrators Expressed a Number of Concerns

Knowing that not all decisions are made in a vacuum and that most leaders draw from a reservoir of valuable experience, I wanted to know what fears or concerns

come to their minds when considering such an application. A great variety of responses were coded by theme and summarized in these statements:

- The acceptance of a child from such a household would appear to condone or grant acceptance of the lifestyle that is clearly unbiblical. (This was mentioned by 12 respondents, and it was the number one concern by far.) One leader wrote, “We believe that families enrolling in our school should not actively and intentionally undermine the beliefs and values we teach. [We might appear to be] ... offering our schools as venues for a kind of ‘sexual evangelism’ that draws students away from biblical sexuality.”
- The future involvement of the couple in school activities or functions in specific and the school’s partnership with them in general is a concern. One administrator stated, “The couple would be forbidden to be active in the Parent Organization of our school.”
- Three administrators expressed concerns about the reactions from other parents and feared that some would be insensitive to both the student and the couple.
- Several mentioned reservations about going against their school’s mission and beliefs and not acting according to their church’s beliefs. Another described that approval of the child’s application would be a breach of the covenant that has its basis in their statement of faith.
- Though apparently unrealized thus far, two other concerns were expressed: First, what is the agenda of the same-sex couples? Would they be hoping to trampoline this enrollment into a larger platform for pushing for acceptance of their lifestyle? Second, would acceptance for enrollment open the door for permitting the enrollment or open expression of a gay lifestyle by this student or any other students?

Conclusions and Interpretations

With over 42 percent of the respondents indicating the decision to enroll a child from a same-sex couple household or taking a position of uncertainty, it seems that a uniform response to this issue is far from obvious. Put another way, when the qualitative responses are factored into the discussion, there are leaders taking positions at polar opposites of the continuum on the issue and holding these positions on the basis of their understanding of biblical principles. But just to clarify, no respondent expressed acceptance of the lifestyle of a same-sex couple nor did any respondent express a lack of compassion or concern for the child involved in the application process. As previously stated, this survey highlights one major concern: three-quarters of those taking the survey indicated that they have no policy regarding this situation, and almost the same percentage indicated that their school board has never reviewed or discussed this topic.

Action item: review your policies, review your practices, and invite your school board to dialogue with you before your next round of interviews and applications.

Additional Issues and Concerns

Here are some of the points that must be carefully considered by school leaders:

- What do our printed materials communicate to the public?
- Do we have a clearly worded, biblically based lifestyle statement in the student handbook?
- Are our admissions practices consistent with our admissions policies?
- Are there misleading statements made in any admissions documents or verbally by staff?
- Are there any local, state, or federal laws that may come into play regarding this issue?

Survey of Leadership Academy Participants

1. Our school has been approached by a same-sex couple for the purpose of admitting their child.

Yes	17; 26.6%
No	47; 73.4%

Approximate number of times:

1–2 times	10; 71.4 %
3–5 times	4; 28.6%

Approximate year (date) of the first contact/ inquiry from a same-sex couple:

2010–2012	7
2007–2009	5
2004–2006	2

2. It is my understanding that our school would respond to the above situation in the following way:

We would allow admission, should the child meet all other requirements.	13; 21.3%
We would not allow admission for this specific reason.	35; 57.4%
I am unsure how we would react.	13; 21.3%

3. Our school has a policy regarding the admission of a student from a same-sex couple.

Yes	14; 24.6%
No	43; 75.4%



4. Our school board has discussed this policy in particular and ...

Framed a policy	10; 16.4%
Determined that existing policies covered this issue	5; 8.2%
Took no action	3; 4.9%
Thinks admissions policies should be left to the administration	5; 8.2%
Issue hasn't been reviewed by the board	38; 62.3%

5. The opportunity for salvation of the child is paramount in our decision to admit a child from such a household.

Strongly Agree	18; 30.5%
Agree	10; 16.9%
Uncertain	12; 20.3%
Disagree	16; 27.1%
Strongly Disagree	3; 5.1%

6. Would you allow the student to continue if the student's household/parents changed to become a same-sex couple?

Would allow to continue	16; 40%
Would dismiss or ask student to leave	17; 42%
Would have dialogue with the couple and explore options with them	7; 18%

[Editor's note: *Legal/Legislative Update* has shared several articles in the past that deal with homosexual issues with parents, students, and employees. Those articles can be found in ACSI ConNEXUS, my.acsi.org, under the resources section of the Legal Legislative group. *The Helmsman* and *Navigating the Storms*, authored by Ken Coley, are two excellent books for administrators or for those seeking to be in administration. You can purchase both through Purposeful Design Publications.]

Ken Coley, EdD, has enjoyed an exciting career in teaching and in educational leadership. After teaching middle school and high school students for 7 years, he was called to the principalship of a Christian school in Maryland, where he served for 15 years. Dr. Coley is currently the director of the Doctor of Education Program at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. He is also a seminar speaker and the author of *The Helmsman: Leading with Courage and Wisdom* and *Navigating the Storms: Leading Christian Schools with Character and Conviction*, a sequel to *The Helmsman*. For more information about Dr. Coley, visit <http://helmsman.org/>. ☞

Press Release

Renewed Form I-9 Expected Soon

The current Employment Eligibility Verification Form, commonly referred to as Form I-9, expired August 31, 2012. Since U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) hasn't issued a replacement form, agency officials say employers should continue to use the current Form I-9, available at www.uscis.gov/files/form/i-9.pdf. USCIS will provide updated information about the new version of the Form I-9 as it becomes available. Employers must complete Form I-9 for all newly hired employees to verify their identity and authorization to work in the United States. Subscribe to I-9 Central at www.uscis.gov/i-9central to receive Form I-9 updates. ☞

IRS Issues Guidance on \$2,500 FSA Limit for 2013

The U.S. Internal Revenue Service issued Notice 2012-40, which provides guidance on the \$2,500 limit on pretax employee contributions to health care flexible spending accounts (FSAs) under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The notice can be found at www.irs.gov/irb/2012-26_IRB/ar09.html. ☞

Worthy Resources

An Administrator's Guide to California Private School Law. 2012. Los Angeles, CA: Liebert Cassidy Whitmore, 450 pp., \$95.00.

If there is going to be an exception to a general rule of law, it will be found in California. And it is precisely because of this proclivity that *An Administrator's Guide to California Private School Law* is so beneficial to administrators. Written by Liebert Cassidy Whitmore (LCW), a California law firm that has specialized in school law issues for over 30 years, this is a necessary tool for all ACSI's California administrators. The book covers 14 specific topics focusing on employee-employer relations and frequent student-related issues. Visit LCW's website to learn more or to order a copy: www.lcwlegal.com/private-school-guide.

Pastor, Church & Law, fourth edition, four-volume set, by Richard R. Hammar. 2008. Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 1,883 pp., set \$99.95.