
**CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS AND THE FUTURES OF EDUCATION:
A Contribution to UNESCO's Futures of Education Commission
by the International Office of Catholic Education
and the Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation**

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INTRODUCTION

Christian schools, and more generally faith-based schools, have played a leading role in educating children, youth, and even adults for centuries or even millennia in some countries. Today, the primary responsibility for providing education rests with the state, but this does not mean that faith-based schools have no role to play. Faith-based schools continue to play a key role in fulfilling the right to education and achieving the fourth Sustainable Development Goal. In particular, Christian schools and institutions of higher learning serve close to 100 million students globally² and provide an important service to their communities and societies. Importantly, Christian and faith-based schools also enable parents to choose (within some reasonable limits) the type of education that should be provided to their children.

Christian schools operate in most countries of the world, but their presence is especially prominent in low income countries, including in sub-Saharan Africa. Historically, they played a leading role in providing education in underserved areas. They continue today to emphasize the need to reach the poor and vulnerable. They are closely embedded in their communities. However, the ability of Christian schools to fulfill their mission is being threatened, including right now by the implications of the COVID-19 crisis, especially in countries where the schools do not benefit from state support. In those countries, the current economic crisis is reducing the ability of parents to afford the education provided by Christian schools. Some organizations have argued that the state should be the sole provider of formal education. Others have argued that states should not be allowed to provide financial support to Christian and other faith-based schools. We do not agree with such views. Instead, we believe that education pluralism, whereby different types of schools coexist and benefit from state support, has important benefits for democratic societies, especially in the context of the challenges of the 21st century.

The present contribution by the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC) and GPENreformation (Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation, the international network of Protestant schools)³ was prepared for UNESCO's Futures of Education Commission. We hope that this contribution will help in clarifying some of the benefits that Christian schools provide to education systems, communities, and societies. We also hope that this contribution will help frame constructive relationships between states and faith-based schools for the benefit of all. The note is divided into four sections on, respectively, the aims of Christian schools, their contributions, the right to education, and some of the challenges that Christian schools face.

AIMS OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

In many ways, Christian schools function as quasi 'public' schools. In some countries, a majority of Christian schools benefit from state support and are considered as public schools. When this is the case, parents normally can send their children to Christian schools at no or

² This estimate is based on data from the Catholic Church as well as GPENreformation and other Protestant networks. It includes both K12 education (pre-primary, primary, and secondary education) and tertiary education. On data issues related to measuring the contribution of Christian schools, see Wodon (2020a).

³ On the mission of Protestant schools globally, see Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation (2017).

little cost to them. In all countries, Christian schools typically welcome students from all backgrounds, whether the children are Christian or not. The schools respect democratic principles and aim to work in a transparent and open way. They rely on accepted scientific knowledge and promote critical thinking, freedom, solidarity, and debate in the education they provide.

Christian schools contribute to the public or common good. A few years ago, UNESCO published a document entitled *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?*⁴ This document highlighted the importance of considering education as a common good, given the benefits of the realization of the right of education for individuals and their community⁵. Christian schools share UNESCO's vision in ensuring that the full benefits of education are reaped not only for individuals and their families, but also for communities and societies.

While in many aspects of Christian schools are 'public' in nature, the schools are rooted in the gospel. Christian schools consider religious education as an indispensable and central component of the broader education they provide to their students. Religious education can in fact protect against fundamentalism, recognizing that fundamentalism can be not only religious, but also secular. Rejecting fundamentalism, the schools have a long tradition of opening students' horizons to keep an open mind towards religion, while respecting the student's own beliefs – or lack thereof. Tolerance in religious education is a key reason why in most countries, many students enrolled in Christian schools are not Christian themselves. One of the aims of religious education is to help students contextualize their own beliefs through a hermeneutical understanding (at the appropriate level given the student's age) of foundational texts and documents. Another aim is to initiate students to inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, so that students can understand the roots of their own beliefs, which in turn enables them to critically reflect on their religion and be prepared to talk with "the other."

Centered in Christ, Christian schools are bound to operate according to Christian ethics, striving to make the diaconal and charitable dimension of the Christian faith visible⁶. The aim of Christian schools is not to make a profit, but to make the world a better place "to serve it and to guard and protect it" (Genesis 2:15). The schools are sometimes known as 'charity schools', aiming to serve the poor, even if this is not always easy due to financial constraints. More generally, within a pluralistic and globalized world, the schools hold dear the following values:

- **Quality of education and care for students:** The world and in particular low income countries are faced with a severe learning crisis which is being exacerbated by the current pandemic⁷. Christian schools are often recognized in their countries for the quality of the education they provide, not only in terms of academic performance, but also in terms of socio-emotional skill and the care teachers and staff provide to students.
- **Equity in education:** The conviction that every person is equal before God also means that every person, regardless of his or her origin or financial means, must have access to

⁴ See UNESCO (2015).

⁵ Other studies have also demonstrated the wide-ranging benefits of education for the Sustainable Development Goals. See for example Wodon et al. (2018a, 2018b) on the cost of not educating girls.

⁶ This relates to the aim of education towards fraternal humanism (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017).

⁷ On the learning crisis, see World Bank (2018a, 2018b, 2019). On the pandemic, see World Bank (2020).

quality education. Educational justice is therefore a central principle and requirement of Christian education, reflecting the aim to achieve integral human development.

- **Social justice and preferential option for the poor:** The question of educational justice also means working for social justice - locally, but also globally. The need to *“Promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups”*, as well as *“the maintenance of peace”* (art.26.2 UDHR) are natural pillars of Christian education. The preferential option for the poor is a core value in Christian education⁸, with many schools aiming to serve the least, the last, and the lost. The focus on the ‘periphery’ is related to a shared understanding of the importance of communion, dialogue, solidarity, and a sense of unity in diversity within the schools.
- **Human rights education:** In the different Christian traditions, peace plays an important role. Schools should contribute to *“Peace, Justice and Life”* (Martin Luther) or as Pope Francis would say to *“peace and justice”*. This is again in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when it states that one of the missions of the right to education is *“to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”* (art.26.2 UDHR). Committing to human rights, teaching and educating about human rights, and addressing rights violations are a natural part of Christian education.
- **Education for sustainability:** Sustainable development is another fundamental pillar of Christianity *“for the earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains”* (1 Co. 10:26). Education for sustainable development and a commitment to the preservation of creation are a matter of course of Christian education, as emphasized by Pope Francis’ (2015) encyclical.
- **Global dimension:** Christian-sponsored schools aim to broaden the perspective of the local community towards the ecumenical, worldwide Christianity. This perspective promotes global empathy and a willingness to work together across national borders.

Christian schools aim to contribute to the fulfilment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, by preparing their students for a meaningful life in a pluralistic and globalizing world. They strive to work towards this goal in a number of different ways (recognizing that many if not all of these approaches are also shared by public schools):

- **Christian schools educate with regards to human values:** Values such as tolerance, mutual care, solidarity, and mindfulness are central concerns in Christian service and charity. The schools aim to live these values and promote them in the community. This is evident in their endeavor to include students of various cultures, faiths, learning styles, and physical abilities. Aiming for inclusion is a requirement for Christian schools.
- **Christian schools promote personality and personal responsibility:** Christian education aims to strengthen *“the full development of the human personality”* (art. 13.2 ICESCR),

⁸ See for exaple McKinney (2018).

promoting individual responsibility among others through extra-curricular activities. The aim is to help all children, regardless of their faith, to understand who they are and to have a better understanding of their community and how to serve this community.

- **Christian schools strive for high-quality education and upbringing:** Every student should be encouraged to achieve his/her full potential. Christian schools strive for an education grounded in science, but also in a hermeneutical understanding of foundational religious texts, so that freedom of expression and a culture of dialogue between traditions as well as debate are encouraged. In line with what is stated in Human Rights Instruments, the schools consider global citizenship education and education for sustainability as important issues to be included in the curriculum.
- **Christian schools aim to be a place of refuge for children and young people:** Christian schools should be places where parents know that their children and young people will be safe. Attention and respect for the rights of children are important concerns. Violence in school, including the risk of sexual abuse, is simply not acceptable in the schools.

SELECTED CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS⁹

Globally, Christian schools are disproportionately located in low income countries. Historically, the schools were often founded in underserved or neglected areas, the development of which they contributed to. Today, many schools remain in rural areas. The schools aim to welcome all, including refugees and internally displaced persons. Locally, they have a long tradition of serving the poor. This does not mean that the schools necessarily serve the poor more than other groups, but rather that they often aim to serve the poor as much as possible within the constraints they face¹⁰. Even as states took on the primary responsibility of providing education to their populations, Christian schools continued to fill gaps in education provision when states were unable to fulfil their mission. This is one of the reasons why Christian schools have a large footprint in countries that have been affected by fragility and conflict such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, or Uganda in Africa¹¹. In other contexts such as those of Belgium or the Netherlands where Christian schools also have large enrolments, this typically reflects the state's self-understanding that a tolerant secular society should enable every religious group to benefit from state-funded education. But more generally, even in other countries when enrolment in Christian schools may be lower, the schools still make important contributions to education systems, communities, and societies.

This section discusses some of the contributions made by Christian schools not only to education systems, but also to communities, societies, and national economies. While data on enrollment in Protestant schools are available for some countries, they are not available

⁹ This section is based in large part on Wodon (2020b, 2021).

¹⁰ On whether faith-based schools succeed in serving the poor in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, see for example Wodon (2014, 2015, 2019c, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e).

¹¹ See Wenz (2020) on Rwanda and Wodon (2017) on the Democratic Republic of Congo.

globally. Less research has also been conducted on the performance and contributions of non-Catholic Christian schools than is the case for Catholic schools. Therefore, the focus in this section is mostly based on research for Catholic schools, relying in part on recent work carried out at the International Office of Catholic Education. Yet similar observations could probably be made for other Christian schools given that they share many of the same characteristics.

Contributions to Education Systems and Communities

Global and country level data on faith-based education are often problematic¹². In the case of Catholic schools however, data on the number of students enrolled in pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools are available from the Church's annual statistical yearbooks, with the most recent data available for 2018¹³. That year, 7.4 million children were enrolled in Catholic preschools globally¹⁴, 35.0 million children attended primary schools, and 19.3 million children attended secondary schools, yielding a total enrollment of more than 62.1 million children. Globally, the Catholic Church manages more than 100,000 primary schools, close to 50,000 secondary schools, and over 70,000 preschools. In addition, 6.6 million students are enrolled in Catholic institutions of higher learning globally. While similar data at the global level are not available for other Christian schools, GPENreformation estimates that 25 million pupils may be enrolled in Protestant schools globally. Of those, 10.5 million are enrolled in schools that belong to the GPENreformation network. All included, from preschools to universities, Christian schools and universities therefore probably serve close to 100 million students globally¹⁵.

In terms of trends over time, a few stylized facts emerge from the data on Catholic schools¹⁶, with similar findings likely to be valid also for other Christian schools. Total enrollment in Catholic schools from kindergarten to 12th grade more than doubled between 1975 and 2018 globally, with most of the growth concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. This is due to particularly high rates of population growth and gains in educational attainment in that region. Globally, the share of students enrolled in Catholic schools has remained somewhat stable over time, with just under five percent of all students enrolled in public and private primary level studying in a Catholic school, and a slightly lower proportion at the secondary level. There is however a lot of heterogeneity between countries in the size of Christian school networks. Together, the top 15 countries in terms of enrollment in K12 Catholic schools account for two thirds of global enrollment. Similarly, GPENreformation schools tend to be concentrated in some countries more than others. Nevertheless, globally, after public school networks in China and India, Christian school networks are among the largest providers of education and training worldwide.

By enrolling a large number of students today and in the foreseeable future¹⁷, Christian and other faith-based schools contribute to education systems in the countries where they operate. In addition, there is a substantial literature on the performance of Christian schools,

¹² Many states count faith-based schools as state schools when the salaries of teachers are financed by the state. As a result, the number of faith-based schools is often underestimated (Scheunpflug and Wenz, 2015).

¹³ Secretariat of State of the Vatican (2020).

¹⁴ On the importance of investing in early childhood development including preschools, see Black et al. (2017).

¹⁵ See Wodon (2020a).

¹⁶ See Wodon (2018a, 2020b).

¹⁷ Wodon (2019a) suggests that enrolment in faith-based schools is likely to remain high in the future.

and especially Catholic schools, in terms of student learning. Broadly speaking, this literature suggests that in comparison to public schools, Christian schools often do well. In the same way that Christian schools may learn from the experience of public schools, public education systems could also learn from the experience of Christian schools when they appear especially successful in educating disadvantaged children. As one example, the education literature emphasizes the role that autonomy and accountability play in school performance¹⁸. Fe y Alegría schools in Latin America can provide inspiration in this area¹⁹.

Importantly, possibly in part because of their emphasis on values as well as their concern for equity and social justice, Christian schools tend to do well on a range of other metrics, whether one considers the ability of children to pursue higher education, a reduced level of violence in schools, stronger civic attitudes among students, and a range of other benefits for the communities in which Christian schools are located²⁰. Again, there are potentially large benefits to be reaped, including for public schools, in better understanding what drives success in the subset of Christian schools that appear to perform especially well in those areas.

Contributions to Societies and Economies

There is a debate in some countries and at the international level as to whether states should provide funding for low cost nonprofit ‘private’ schools, which would include Christian schools. We believe that provided Christian schools fulfill reasonable conditions to be eligible for state funding, they should indeed benefit from such funding. Yet today, as a result of lack of public funding or lower funding than for public schools in many countries, Christian schools generate large savings for state budgets since parents pay some or all the cost of sending their children to school. For Catholic schools, estimates for 38 OECD and partner countries suggest that budget savings from Catholic schools in these countries can be valued at US\$ 63 billion per year in purchasing power parity terms²¹. When comparing those estimates to those for private schools overall, Catholic schools account for 35.4 percent of total budget savings from private schools at the primary level, and 19.2 percent at the secondary level globally in the 38 countries included. Similar analysis for Catholic colleges and universities suggests that Catholic tertiary education institutions help generate in the same set of countries another \$43 billion in savings for state budgets versus a situation in which students would enroll in public institutions²².

Another way to show the economic contribution of Christian schools is to compute the share of human capital wealth created by the schools using World Bank data on the changing wealth of nations. Wealth is the assets base that enables nations to generate future income. Human capital wealth is defined as the present value of the future earnings of a country’s labor force. The other two main sources of wealth are produced capital and natural capital, but human capital wealth accounts for a much larger proportion of total wealth than natural capital and produced capital²³. Estimates suggest that Catholic schools may contribute globally US\$ 12

¹⁸ See Demas and Arcia (2015)

¹⁹ See Parra Osorio and Wodon (2014) and Wodon (2019b) for a discussion.

²⁰ See Brinig and Garnett (2014), as well as Dee (2005).

²¹ See Wodon (2019d).

²² See Wodon (2018b). See also Wodon (2019e) for estimates for all private schools.

²³ See Lange et al. (2018).

trillion to the changing wealth of nations²⁴. The main objectives of Christian schools are not economic, but their economic contribution is clearly substantial.

THE RIGHT TO QUALITY EDUCATION

Christian schools see the education that they provide as a public good that should be accessible to all children regardless of their origin, gender, language, culture or religion. When the schools are simply referred to as ‘private schools’, this may carry the perceptions that the schools are expensive elite schools only accessible to the well-to-do. This ascription does not match the self-image of Christian schools, which consider themselves rather as non-state ‘public’ (i.e., accessible to all) religious schools for the common good. Christian schools contribute to the public educational mandate. As mentioned earlier, they provide both secular and religious education and promote individual responsibility in improving the world. They foster a sense of community, while also emphasizing the values of charity and tolerance.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that: *(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages [...]. (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms [...]. (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.*

The right of parents to choose the kind of education that their children should receive²⁵ is fundamental, and recognized in other international human rights instruments as well. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) affirms in Article 13 that *“The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”*

Freedom of religion is also a human right (art. 18 UDHR, art.18 CCPR). Moreover, children have the right to religion (art. 14.1 CRCh) and, in this regard, states must *“respect the rights and duties of the parents (...) to provide direction to the child”* (art. 14.1 CRCh). Indeed, an important dimension of the right of freedom of religion is the “teaching” (art. 18 UDHR, art.18 CCPR), acknowledging that this right to religion should not conflict with *“the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and (...) the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”* (art. 13.1 ICESCR). Christian schools have a long tradition of combining enlightenment and the right to religion. As stated by the European Court of Human Rights, *“the freedom of education is an essential part of the Right to Education, no matter if public or private.”* Furthermore, the Court also recognizes that *“safeguarding the possibility of pluralism in education (...) is essential for the preservation of the “democratic society.””*²⁶

²⁴ See Wodon (2019f).

²⁵ On the fact that parental preferences are not uniform, see for example Gemignani and Wodon (2014) on Ghana and Burkina Faso, and Wodon (2020j) on the United States.

²⁶ See European Court of Human Rights, sentence *Folgero c/ Norway*, par. 84.

SELECTED CHALLENGES

Today, many Christian and other faith-based schools face major challenges to fulfill their mission. These challenges are compounded by the learning crisis that affects education systems, especially in low and lower-middle income countries²⁷. Without aiming to be exhaustive, a few of the challenges that Christian school will need to face in the future are mentioned hereafter:

- **Responding to the COVID 19 pandemic and other crises:** Students and schools worldwide are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic²⁸ and other global challenges such as climate change, forced displacement, and poverty. In some areas, Christian schools are particularly vulnerable, especially when they do not benefit from public funding²⁹. Within the context of the current pandemic, ensuring access for all to options for distance learning should also be a goal for Christian schools. For a sustainable future, it is essential for Christian schools to reduce their own carbon footprint and sensitize students to the need to reduce the potential negative impacts of climate change. In terms of inclusion, apart from welcoming traditionally excluded groups such as children with disabilities or LGBTQ children, it is also essential for Christian schools to welcome other vulnerable groups such as refugees and internally displaced persons, the number of which is increasing according to the latest estimates from the United Nations.
- **Rejecting fundamentalism and educating towards social cohesion and solidarity:** Fundamentalism of a political or religious nature is widespread today and promoted through digital media and other channels of communication. Christian schools must contribute to immunizing against such views. Christian schools are aware that they may not themselves be immune from the danger of religious or political fundamentalism and need to remain open to a critical examination that can help them overcome this danger. A commitment to human rights and global citizenship education must also be reaffirmed with the aim to educate towards social cohesion and solidarity.
- **Supporting teachers:** Teachers are perhaps society's most important profession³⁰. They need to be supported and nurtured. They also need to be able to make a living, which requires decent pay. Today, there seems to be a global shortage of qualified teachers. This is a challenge especially for Christian schools when public schools are able to better

²⁷ See World Bank (2018, 2020) and Bashir et al. (2018) for Africa.

²⁸ Apart from the learning crisis just mentioned, 258 million children remain out of school (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019) and countries are not on track to meet SDG4 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2019). The situation is even more critical now due to the potential impact of the pandemic (United Nations, 2020), with potentially dire implications for long term poverty reduction given the importance of educational attainment to reduce poverty (UNESCO, 2017). The needs of vulnerable groups in particular have been highlighted in the latest Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020).

²⁹ On the impact of the pandemic on Catholic schools and their responses, see Wodon (2020f, 2020g, 2020i) as well as other papers published in the special issue of the Journal of Catholic Education on this topic.

³⁰ On policies to support teachers, see for example Beteille and Evans (2018).

pay their teachers because they benefit from public funding while Christian schools may not. To overcome these challenges, Christian schools must work together and enter in dialogue with the state. Another issue faced by Christian schools is insufficient training about the mission and core principles of the schools³¹.

- **Funding schools:** We believe that as long as Christian schools meet basic requirements that are legitimate for the state to enforce, they should benefit from public funding under our understanding of the right to education mentioned earlier. Equal funding per child would go a long way in most countries to enable Christian schools to continue to play their role as part of pluralistic education systems which are essential for democracy. In some countries, funding for Christian schools is enshrined in the law, but has not actually been provided with the state accumulating arrears. Education in primary and secondary schools should be accessible at no cost to parents in the school of their choice for their children. In many countries, the relationship between Christian schools and the state is not as good as it should be. The blame for this state of affairs can go both ways. Hence efforts to improve relationships should also go both ways. But the benefits could be large. As just one example, partnerships could be enhanced and synergies achieved in teacher and curriculum development towards the goal of ensuring learning for all.

CONCLUSION

At the launch of the Global Compact on Education in October 2020, Pope Francis reminded the education community that *“To educate is always an act of hope, one that calls for cooperation in turning a barren and paralyzing indifference into another way of thinking that recognizes our interdependence. [...] The journey of life calls for hope grounded in solidarity. All change requires a process of education in order to create new paradigms capable of responding to the challenges and problems of the contemporary world, of understanding and finding solutions to the needs of every generation, and in this way contributing to the flourishing of humanity now and in the future.”*³² In her video message for the Global Compact, Audrey Azoulay, Director General of UNESCO, noted that the goals of the Global Compact are also UNESCO’s goals. We need to *“build a world based on fairness, solidarity and dignity, through international cooperation and education, by revealing our shared humanity. In this way, we will be able to prepare the next generations to face the future”*³³, she told us. These are aspirations shared by Christian schools.

The aim of UNESCO’s Futures of Education Commission is to reimagine how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet. Christian schools, as represented in this contribution by the International Office of Catholic Education and the Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation, stand ready to support the Commission in its important work, so that education can indeed fulfill its mission of ‘Learning to Become.’

³¹ This relates to the importance of ‘spiritual capital’. See for example Grace (2002).

³² Francis (2020).

³³ Azoulay (2020).

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