

CLIMBING MT. EVEREST – THE FUTURE OF MENNONITE EDUCATION

The highest point on earth. Mt. Everest. To climb to that summit has captivated the hearts and plans and pocketbooks of hundreds of adventurers over the years. One of these people is Jon Krakauer—journalist, outdoorsman, and climber. When *Outside* magazine gave him the opportunity to join a group attempting to scale the mountain, he said he answered yes without pausing to catch his breath. Then as a journalist he chronicled every grueling step of the way to the summit of Everest in a captivating account entitled *Into Thin Air*.

In this account, Krakauer describes a number of challenges Everest presents to the aspiring climber. First, the last road ends and you are still a hundred miles from the peak where you are headed. Second, there is nothing within miles of the summit that can be used for food or fuel. And then there is the weather. The temperature at the summit can reach -100 degrees with howling winds of 100 mph and more. And that is not all. The oxygen content at the summit is 1/3 of the amount in the air at altitudes where most of us live. In addition, the terrain can be treacherous (think *avalanche*), and the weather unpredictable.

How does one overcome these challenges? Krakauer tells us that the first task of the climber is to establish Base Camp. The Base Camp is several miles from the summit and provides a place to organize the assault to the top. This is never a solo effort but involves a large team of climbers and supporting people—often native Sherpas—who help transport the enormous amounts of food, fuel, oxygen, shelter, climbing equipment, radios, etc. needed for the month-long effort. Conquering Everest does not happen quickly. Ordinarily, a distance of several miles would not seem daunting, but place that at the top of the world with all of the challenges listed earlier, and the undertaking is monumental. Over the next weeks, the climbers climb during the day then come back down for the night, making an effort to acclimatize their bodies to the difficult conditions. After several days, another camp is established further up the mountain, supplies are transferred, and the climbers who can stay there use that as the base camp. The process continues to a third camp and then a fourth and a fifth—the camp from which the final attempt will be made. After four or more weeks of grueling work, intense headaches, little sleep (because it is often difficult to sleep at high altitudes), hunger, intense cold, boredom, and overwhelming weariness, the pieces are in place to make the final push. Finally! The summit! Victory! Through careful planning, teamwork, and lots of grunt work, the seemingly insurmountable is accomplished.

As conservative Mennonite communities, we have our own mountain to climb.

God has blessed our churches and communities with numerous schools. Incalculable time and energy have been poured into our schools by our school boards, principals, and teachers. Our schools have been a blessing to our families and churches. Much good has been done. The Base Camp has been established. But our schools can be more, much more, and that is our opportunity. That is our mountain.

Our schools can be much more. It is not enough that our students score higher than the average public school student. Compared to the typical student in the public system, the students in our schools have been blessed with homes where there is much more discipline, much more love, much less fighting & abuse, much less relational friction, and much less mind and heart pollution. I suspect that public schools are doing better with the students they have to work with than we would if we were in their shoes. With our students, we should be well above average. Our schools can be much more academically.

We can grow in our capacity to assist, to partner with the home and church. We can do better at integrating educational objectives with the mandates of the church and home. We do

not have to pursue separate agendas. We can do better at helping our students value their homes and churches. Our schools can be much more in service to the community of believers.

Our schools can be much more. Our schools can do much more than fulfill the government requirements for education. Our schools can be more than a protection from the world. They can be a positive cooperative force for nurturing a generation that is committed to Jesus Christ, to His church, and to their families. Our schools can be much more in purpose.

We can do better at producing students who understand, who can articulate, and who are passionately committed to a Christ-centered life and worldview. Students who embrace their primary identity as followers of Christ in contrast to a primary identity as Americans. Students who actively participate in the calls to “subdue the earth” and “make disciples of all nations.” Students who have an adequate base for developing in the trades, the sciences, business, and other vocations. Our schools can be much more in effectiveness.

But just as climbing Mt. Everest can't be achieved in one thrust for the summit, neither can our vision for better schools be achieved in one burst of effort. Climbing a mountain, reaching the summit takes a series of disciplined and measured intermediate steps. And so it will be for us. Our base camp is in place. We want to identify four intermediate camps that should be established to pursue this much-more of Mennonite education.

A first camp that must be established if we are to achieve the summit is a greatly enlarged pool of older, godly, experienced, and competent teachers. The single most significant human factor in the everyday success of our schools is the teacher. From all indications, we are suffering a severe lack of willing teachers, much less teachers who are equipped for the work.

We need godly teachers. When our schools are staffed by teachers whose years of enduring faith in Jesus Christ have allowed Him to transform them into wise, winsome, and Spirit-directed men and women, we will be closer to the summit. Our children are at stake here. Teachers influence children for hundreds of hours every year. Our children spend much more time in school than in church. We need godly teachers.

We need older teachers. When the average age of the teachers in our schools is closer to forty than twenty, we will be closer to the crest. An older teacher brings the priceless qualities of experience, wisdom, and gravity. The resulting stability could eliminate many of the problems that plague our schools and that disillusion students and parents. The ancient Hebrews said it this way: “He who learns of a young teacher is like a man who eats green grapes and drinks wine fresh from the press; but he who has a master of mature years is like a man who eats ripe and delicious grapes and drinks old wine.” We need older teachers.

We need experienced teachers. When the average teaching experience of our teachers is ten years rather than three, we will be closer to the peak. Teaching is a vocation that requires a tremendous amount of learning. The learning curve is steep. It is the veteran teachers who can help our schools run smoothly and effectively. Unfortunately, the turnover of teachers in our schools is high, making it difficult to sustain a core of teachers with adequate experience. We understand this concept well in most other occupations. Trying to establish a successful business will never work if most of the workers, including the one in charge, stay only two to three years. We need experienced teachers.

We need competent teachers. When our classrooms are filled with teachers who have paid the price to develop the knowledge and skills of effective teaching, we will be closer to the summit. The ability to teach effectively is a developed gift. There is so much to learn even for the most naturally formed teacher. So much to learn about the Christian worldview that undergirds and infiltrates everything that is studied in the classroom. So much to learn about the world God created. So much to learn about the mathematical framework for the universe. So much to learn

about the diversity, beauty, intricacy, and enormity of the cosmos. So much to learn about the way God has been present in history. So much to learn about the needs and workings of our students. So much to learn about classroom management and lesson development. So much to learn. So much to become. We need competent teachers.

School boards, principals, churches—let us renew our commitment to identifying, calling, supporting, and equipping the people from our communities who will teach for ten-twenty-thirty years. Who are the people among us that by their character and by their ability to communicate have earned the right to influence the next generation? Let us work to find ways to involve our seasoned citizens in the school. Let us work to keep effective teachers teaching.

Instead of spending all of our energy finding a teacher just for next year, let us invest energy in finding and calling teachers for service in three to four years and then help them walk the path to becoming a prepared teacher. Could we develop a long-term plan for developing the people we really want to be teaching rather than engaging in the annual frantic search for whosoever will? Until our vision grows from the immediate need of teachers for this year, we will be locked in the energy depleting cycle of (1) finally, after fifteen calls, finding a teacher, (2) only to have them stumble (often due to lack of preparation, experience, and age) and then needing to repeat the process. Identifying, calling, and equipping long-term teachers will cost us. However, when we don't need to find new teachers every year and when we enjoy the blessings of schools operated by seasoned, competent staffs, we will be delighted with the investment.

To those of us who are teaching, we too have a major role in establishing this camp. We should ask, "Is God calling me to make a long-term commitment to teaching?" When the question we ask is "Should I teach another year?," we never make the kind of commitment that energizes us to pay the full price required for growing and developing as a teacher. When we begin to think in terms of 10-20-30 years of teaching, then the need to study and learn and grow as a teacher becomes a motivating reality. Even if we are not able to make the long-term commitment, opening ourselves to the possibility of long-term involvement can net significant gains in personal growth.

Each of us should also be asking, "How I can develop into a teacher that has something to offer to the broader educational community—as a writer, curriculum developer, speaker, workshop leader, evaluator, or consultant?" Each of us can pursue some aspect of education in which we become proficient and knowledgeable so as to be able to serve other schools and teachers.

And let us as teachers recommit ourselves to everyday faithfulness in our calling. Perhaps our schools will not be filled with the kind of teachers described here until our communities value education and school to a greater degree. But our communities will be unable to value education and school as we ought until our schools and teachers have established a reliable track record of substantively blessing the homes and churches of our students. Establishing that track record is worth our best energies.

The first camp—committed teachers.

A second camp that paces our progress toward the summit is a set of clearly defined beliefs. Beliefs about the purposes of our schools—why we exist. Beliefs about what should be taught—the content.

From the early morning rituals (teachers greeting each other, final lesson preparations, copies made, arrival of the students) to the fabric of the school day (classes, recess, awards and punishments, lunchtime practices, tests, reviews, speeches, field trips, discussions) to the end-of-day procedures, school is a whirlwind of hundreds of activities, practices, procedures, sights, and sounds. But what are the beliefs that guide those practices? Why do we do school this way and

not another? Do these practices flow from our beliefs and values or are they merely borrowed from everyone else who does school? We have our own schools, but why? How does God want us to do school?

What do we want for our students when they graduate? What kinds of character? What kinds of visions and desires and intentions? What kinds of skills? What kinds of knowledge? What kinds of attitudes? And how can we go about cultivating this in our students?

Anabaptism was a movement that included profound and far-reaching ideas—ideas anchored in God’s word—ideas that have given shape to a subculture, a heritage, a way of life. There is still a unique Anabaptist practice, but is there an Anabaptist mind? Is there a worldview that adequately supports the practice? What are the ideas, the truths, and the teachings that God has formed us as a people to see and to live? What kind of school and classes and teaching methods are consistent with those ideas? And how should these emphases shape our schools? How does an Anabaptist worldview impact our beliefs about why we would educate, about how we will educate, and about what will be included in education? What are the compelling beliefs that can give unique shape to all facets of our schools, the courses we require students to take, the books we have them read, the projects, the assignments, the discussions, and the way we teach?

These questions need ongoing consideration in ways that discern the mind of Christ and begin to permeate our thinking, our planning, our teaching, our curriculum, and our activities.

If we don’t think about these things ourselves, we will merely absorb practices that flow from ideas divergent to our own. This is hard work, work that we may prefer to leave to others, but work that is a part of faithfulness to Christ. In the absence of significant work on our part, we have no choice but to adopt the patterns of the schools around us. We will be schools with only cosmetic distinctives—different dress codes, no sports programs, no Harry Potter books in the library. We will not be schools with thorough, substantive emphases that flow from and reinforce our fundamental values and beliefs.

We need teachers, church leaders, students of the Word, thoughtful observers, and other interested individuals to pray, study, think, and write in these areas. We need to organize working meetings so that more of us can profit from the work that is being done. Each school needs to devote time and energy to a consideration of our beliefs and how they are fleshed out or are not being fleshed out in our schools. Our curriculum providers and larger schools can devote resources to the effort. Working on a variety of fronts we can move toward a gathering consensus about what it means to operate our schools to the glory of God within an Anabaptist framework.

If our schools are to be much more, every facet needs to be thought through again and again from our bedrock beliefs. The opportunities here are exciting—God has blessed our heritage with some unique emphases that can equip us to bless our communities and the world. Without arrogance or embarrassment we can embrace the grace of God that has been present, form our schools in ways that are consistent with that grace, and faithfully live out of that grace day by day.

The second camp—compelling beliefs.

A third camp that will move us toward our goal is curriculum. We need a course of study that has been carefully designed to accomplish the purposes consistent with our fundamental commitments. The camp of curriculum cannot be firmly established until the camp of beliefs is operational.

As the picture of what we believe about education becomes clearer, the hard work of translating that into a course of study is necessary. Some good work has been and is being done

by our publishing houses. And there are many materials produced from outside of our tradition that have significant value for us. But there is also much that remains to be done.

I would like to suggest several areas for focused effort.

The first is curriculum designed for the small school. Many of our schools have less than fifty students. This will probably remain the norm because of our small communities. This is not a problem to be lamented but an opportunity to be embraced. We will need to have mixed classrooms. Our teachers will need to teach multiple subjects to multiple grades. Again, there are strengths here to be capitalized on. The problem is that so little work has been done in providing a curriculum that maximizes the inherent strengths and minimizes the accompanying weaknesses. Perhaps we need an entirely new approach to curriculum for our kind of schools, a curriculum that retains the dynamic interaction of teacher and students while minimizing the clerical aspects of the traditional curriculum, a curriculum that merges the benefits of the self-paced and conventional classroom models, a curriculum that frees the teacher to take responsibility for significant interaction with students in the areas where discussion and guidance are critical to the learning process, a curriculum that will make it possible for small schools to have a traditional classroom experience, a curriculum that is specifically designed to make the most of multi-grade classrooms and small student numbers.

A second area for focused curriculum development is the preschool. Our schools have traditionally not encouraged preschool and kindergarten, and rightly so. The result is that when students start first grade, they are at widely divergent starting points. Additional work needs to be done in developing and communicating a baseline of first-grade readiness. In addition we must develop tools parents can use to help their children achieve those baselines prior to enrollment.

A third area for curricular development is grammar-intensive elementary courses focusing on essential knowledge. Classical education theory and the work done by the Core Knowledge Foundation have made a compelling case for content-rich elementary curriculums. There is a body of information that ought to be learned by all students. Children who do not know this information will be handicapped in their ability to live in, understand, and influence their surroundings. E. D. Hirsch and associates have identified what it is Americans need to know by the time they finish each grade. But what, in addition to that, do followers of Christ need to know? What is the essential information about Christianity, about Mennonite history and beliefs, about the Bible, and about the world that every one of our children needs to know? While there will be considerable overlap with the core knowledge identified by Hirsch, there is work to be done in identifying a Christian core knowledge and integrating that into the elementary course of study.

A fourth arena for curriculum development is the inclusion of age-appropriate logic and critical thinking instruction, particularly in the junior-high grades. Prior to some of the modern learning innovations, logic formed a part of the curriculum. It is time to bring it back. Learning the processes of clear thinking and how to avoid thinking that obscures the truth will serve to move us and our children toward the One who is truth.

A fifth focus for curriculum work is history. Perhaps more than any other subject, history shapes the identity of our students. When we use materials that are designed to cultivate middle-class Republican Americans with conservative values, it is not surprising to find that our young people identify more with that vision than the vision for the global body of Christ. History—the study of people and events that have influenced our world—is a powerful force in forming the vision and commitment of our children. We must emphasize the stories of men and women who overcome evil with good, whether as businessmen, doctors, farmers, inventors, or missionaries. We must begin telling the stories of Christian history at an early age. We must tell the stories

from our Mennonite heritage early and often so that Dirk Willems and Michael Sattler capture the hearts and minds of our children instead of Robert E. Lee and Norman Swartzkopf. We must give our children ways to think about and understand the troubling aspects of history from a Christ-centered perspective. We must teach a positive vision of God's sovereignty and how He wants to use each one of us to fill the earth with the knowledge of God. Developing a history curriculum with our values in place must happen.

The third camp—a consistent curriculum. Curriculum that intentionally grows out of and supports our beliefs and purposes will contribute greatly to our becoming much more as schools.

A fourth camp that marks the path to the summit in education is visionary, energized, and intentional leadership. For our schools to be more, they must be led by principals who devote time and energy to leadership of the school. For our schools to be more, they must be guided by boards that create a framework for growth and development and insist that it happens.

Our principals need energy. Our schools are often small, led by principals who must also teach. This is necessary and good. A teaching principal stays connected with the students and school. However, leading a school requires more time and energy than can be tacked onto the end of an already full day. It is imperative that our principals are given significant blocks of time when they are alert and energized to give attention to the overall vision and direction of the school. The principal must be given time to:

1. Pursue through prayer and study the blessing and direction of God for the school.
2. Work hard to establish an inviting, safe, and positive school culture.
3. Guide the school according to its philosophy and objectives.
4. Oversee the maintenance, review, and improvement of the school curriculum.
5. Dream and plan for the future.
6. Submit an annual school progress report and prospectus to the school board.
7. Facilitate training and equipping the teachers in the school.
8. Provide vision, motivation, and direction for the staff and students.

The responsibility for the life, health, and effectiveness of the school must rest squarely on the shoulders of the principal, and this will take time and energy.

Our principals need vision—a picture of how beautiful a quality Christian school really is, a picture of how much a school can bless the church and home, a picture of what God wants to do in the schools they lead. This vision has a chance to grow when principals spend time with other principals and visit other schools. This vision can grow as principals continue their own studies—reading, thinking, praying, taking classes, and attending seminars.

Our principals must be intentional. It is easy for small schools to operate primarily in crisis mode, solving the immediate problems and then having little energy left for the important tasks that don't have deadlines. But our schools will never become more without a significant investment in the long-term vision for the school. This will happen only as principals insist on creating space and time to develop and implement that vision.

Our school boards also play a pivotal role in our climb to the summit. They should not be expected to do the grunt work of educational development. This is the work of the principal and school staff. However:

1. School boards should expect and encourage their teachers and principals to keep growing and learning. They can write these expectations into job descriptions and employment contracts. The expectations should include reading, workshops, classes, and other forms of training. Financial assistance can also be offered to make continuing development more attractive and feasible.

2. School boards should expect growing excellence from the principal and school staff. The board can set the tone of expectation and vision. This alone begins to form a climate wherein principals and teachers can thrive.
3. School boards should provide a structure of clear purposes and policies in which the school is expected to function.
5. School boards should cultivate an atmosphere where the teachers, school, and students are valued and supported; where problems are dealt with face-to-face, where quality, competency, and faithfulness are practiced.

The fourth camp—the camp of leadership. This camp of visionary, energized, and intentional educational leadership must be established if we are to be much more than we are.

Four camps—committed teachers, compelling beliefs, consistent curriculum, competent leaders.

Much of the work we must do in our schools will not happen in our small schools. There is simply not enough time and energy available to teach full-time and work at philosophy and curriculum development. We need new models of forming, articulating, and disseminating vision, purpose, and philosophy that do not require each school to duplicate these efforts.

These challenges are conquered only by a community, not by individuals working alone. This effort to see the quality of our schools significantly improved will require us to work together. We will need to share resources and ideas. Our organizations will need to work together. Schools will need to partner. This will take a widespread cooperative effort—training, equipping, writing, teaching, thinking, publishing, supporting, brainstorming, praying, studying, envisioning, and planning. And with cooperation comes accountability. It is time for our older, experienced teachers and administrators to regularly evaluate every aspect of our schools and identify specific areas where the observed school needs to develop. Perhaps these teams of evaluators could guide us toward establishing the camps we have described.

Challenges like these take time. We must develop a patient twenty- to thirty-year vision, not the frenetic, stressful demands for things to change now. What is called for is hopeful, energized, and sustained faithfulness. This mountain will be climbed by the unsung heroes that day after day pour themselves out for their students and in so doing allow God to grow them into world-class teachers and leaders.

So what does it mean to climb this mountain? What will it look like when we reach the summit? The crest of our Everest is hundreds of Mennonite schools, effectively preparing our young people for visionary, God-centered, sacrificial service in every facet of life, including family, business, church, community, and world. The crest of our Everest is parents who are eager to partner with the school because the school has demonstrated effectiveness in supporting their goals. The crest of our Everest is graduates who demonstrate by their way of life the beliefs and values embedded in the community of home, church, and school.

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