



# Affirmations 2.0

Christian Schooling for a Changing World

STEVEN VRYHOF

# 12 Affirmations 2.0

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## Preface

The original *12 Affirmations* were published more than 20 years ago as a product of some informal gatherings loosely referred to as the "Chicago Conferences." It had a nice little run in the 1990s. Scores of Christian schools ordered copies, and boards and faculties used them to start a discussion based on the questions that drove those who gathered in Chicago: What are we doing? Why are we doing it that way? How could we do it better in the future?

The book reached mainly those Christian schools in the Reformed tradition known by their umbrella organization Christian Schools International (CSI). Many of the tenets of that Reformed tradition remain the source of this book's inspiration and guidance: the sovereignty of God, a high view of Scripture and covenant, the arc of history that traces God's goodness from creation and fall to redemption and restoration, the necessity of grace, and the importance of "all-of-life" cultural engagement as a challenging and rewarding feature of the Christian walk.

This is not a book on Reformed theology, or Reformed doctrine, or Reformed ecclesiology; however, it is a book on Reformed education, and its goal is to provide fresh language to a new generation, asking it to consider again the importance and the power of this kind of Christian schooling. Each generation of educators, parents, students, pastors, and community leaders must articulate and think through and own and implement its own vision for Christian schooling. The hope is that the book will again spark discussions that energize and improve Christian schools, that bring changes that start closing gaps between the ideal and the reality, and that make these institutions strong and effective and sustainable.

This book does not prescribe so much as present ideas to consider. The readers must flesh out the specifics of practice for their particular situation, taking into account what we know about how children learn and what makes for effective schooling experiences, about the times we live in and the nature of our global society, about the conditions of culture and the state of the planet, and about the needs of the specific communities that we inhabit and the constituencies that support us.

I would like to thank my three colleagues who wrote for the original book: Joel Brouwer, Stefan Ulstein, and Dan Vander Ark.

They first captured the thoughts of the original Chicago conferees, and their words remain the foundation of this version. I am grateful to the scores of people from coast to coast who gave suggestions and encouragement for a revised edition. Tim Krell and Elaine Brouwer in particular provided extensive feedback and actual paragraphs for some of the affirmations. I would also like to thank David Koetje and the staff and board of Christian Schools International for the editing and publishing of this revision. Finally, I would like to dedicate my own efforts in this to my wife Gayle, who has been at my side for 30 years as together we have tried to serve the cause of Christian education.

Steven Vryhof  
Chicago, Illinois

# Types of Affirmations



## FOUNDATIONAL AFFIRMATIONS

### AFFIRMATION ONE

#### Clarifying and Applying a Statement of Mission

The Christian school's mission is clarified to shape all policies and practices. Parents, staff, and students discuss frequently and confirm by consensus the school's goals. They rephrase and restate from time to time the biblical rationale for the statement of purpose so that it makes sense to each new generation. Structures are in place to keep practice in line with mission.

### AFFIRMATION TWO

#### Developing an Optimistic Theo-Centric Worldview

The Christian school community stresses the restorative power of God's grace in individual lives and within the world community. In an age of cynicism, fear, and hopelessness, Christian school people leave credit/debit theology to God and focus on redemption, restoration, and renewal—as seen in history, as depicted in literature, as celebrated by the church, and as lived out in the daily life of a grace-filled community.

### AFFIRMATION THREE

#### Cultivating Cultural Discernment

Trusting the Holy Spirit's leading in the life of the community, Christian schooling offers opportunities and provides guidance to exercise discernment—the making of informed Christian choices. Christian school people navigate a money-and-media-dominated culture to get to biblical worldview and Christ-like living. When community members disagree, they commit to preserving their relationship and continuing in conversation.

## FOUNDATIONAL AFFIRMATIONS

### AFFIRMATION FOUR

#### Fostering Caring Engagement

Christian schooling preserves the full range of God-given emotions and cultivates the desire to engage with and care for others. Concepts of stewardship, peace-making, justice, and compassion are translated into practice. In the face of sensory overload (which distracts, desensitizes, and numbs), it prevents community members from becoming flat-souled people by providing life-giving opportunities for sabbath and service.

## EDUCATIONAL AFFIRMATIONS

### AFFIRMATION FIVE

#### Preparing for and Participating in a Changing World

Christian school people take the future seriously by confronting the realities of how and where and with whom and to what end they will spend their lives. As enormous and rapid change continues—in families, in churches, in the environment, and in society—the Christian school experience equips all not only to live in such a world but also to transform it to reflect Christ's kingdom of faith, hope, and love.

### AFFIRMATION SIX

#### Addressing Real Problems and Generating Real Products

Christian schooling offers learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant. Because Christian school people strive to see the world with clear-eyed honesty, they seek whole life stewardship in which work is worship and brokenness is healed. Vocation-minded people penetrate the status quo and work for Christian alternatives that replace injustices and failures with peace and beauty.

### AFFIRMATION SEVEN

#### Building Essential Understandings and Life Skills

The Christian school community has an ongoing dialogue about what is essential and how we use knowledge to grow in wisdom. Christian school people know the story of God and his people, the central realities of the natural world, the expressions of the larger culture, and a sense of history and of how the world works. They practice skills such as reflection, initiative, creativity, perseverance, collaboration, and lifelong learning.

## EDUCATIONAL AFFIRMATIONS

### AFFIRMATION EIGHT

#### Attending to Each Individual's Development

Christian schooling pays attention to and affirms each person's gifts and opportunities, potential, and capacity. Learning strengths are identified, and people are positioned for personal, educational, professional, and vocational success. Pedagogy is first of all effective and meaningful for the student, not convenient and manageable for the teacher.

## COMMUNAL AFFIRMATIONS

### AFFIRMATION NINE

#### Promoting Christian Community

The Christian school is a community in which covenant, not contract, is the foundation for relationships. People are not simply trading money for services, grades for good behavior, or a diploma for seat time. Trust, cooperation, and shared seriousness for the task characterize all interactions. Christian community means not only worshiping and celebrating but also widening the tent and welcoming the stranger.

### AFFIRMATION TEN

#### Recasting Traditional Roles

Christian schooling allows for people's strengths and artistry to be fully utilized. Members of the Christian school community—students, too—relate to each other as facilitators and collaborators in several ways at several levels. All are learners and leaders, donors and keepers of the vision, and instigators and entrepreneurs.

### AFFIRMATION ELEVEN

#### Structuring Schools to Support Learning

The Christian school is the product of thoughtfulness and dialogue and determination. School practices—from calendar and schedules to book selection and learning experiences, from expectations and assessments to values and school culture—reflect the best of what's known about creating spaces for learning. School structures both reflect and shape the life of gratitude to God.

## COMMUNAL AFFIRMATIONS

### AFFIRMATION TWELVE

#### Growing Responsive Learning Communities

The Christian school community institutionalizes in a way that is small, nimble, and transparent. It is continually responsive to God's Spirit, the cultural context, and the needs of all learners. It is an "un-institution" that continuously seeks a more excellent way by planning and structuring for improvement. Commendable practices are emphasized; undeserving ones are de-emphasized.

# AFFIRMATION 1

## Clarifying and Applying a Statement of Mission

The Christian school's mission is clarified to shape all policies and practices. Parents, staff, and students discuss frequently and confirm by consensus the school's goals. They rephrase and restate from time to time the biblical rationale for the statement of purpose so that it makes sense to each new generation. Structures are in place to keep practice in line with mission.

## CLARIFYING AND APPLYING A STATEMENT OF MISSION

EXPOSITION: This institutional self-examination is too often overlooked. Sometimes the mission of the Christian school drifts through the decades without ever being fleshed out into a vision and pursued with the specifics of practice. Sometimes the vision for a school is whatever the current administrator dictates it is. Sometimes practice reflects a schooling philosophy contrary to our intention. Jeannie Oakes, in *Keeping Track*, complains,

We seldom think very much about where practices came from originally and to what problems in schools they were first seen as solutions. We rarely question the view of the world on which practices were based—what humans are like, what society is like, or even what schools are for. We almost never reflect critically about the beliefs we hold about them or about the manifest or latent consequences that result from them. And I think this uncritical, unreflective attitude gets us into trouble. It permits us to act in ways contrary to our intentions. In short, it can lead us and, more important, our students down a disastrous road despite our best purposes.

Because society is fast-moving, ever-changing, and ethically-demanding, Christian school people should constantly ask themselves, "What are we doing? Why are we doing it that way? How could we do it better?" They reflect not only on the purpose

of schooling but the purpose of *life*: To function successfully in society? To make a living? To contribute to the common good? To flourish as an individual? To enrich oneself? To glorify God and build his kingdom?

During my eighty-seven years I have witnessed a whole succession of technological revolutions. But none of them has done away with the need for character in the individual or the ability to think.

Bernard Baruch

After discussing such questions, Christian school people become clearer on the school's purpose. They then examine practice and jettison the non-essential and archaic while tenaciously maintaining the anchor points, always on the lookout for a better way. There is sufficient time for essentials because the irrelevant and the repetitious have been eliminated. If necessary, fewer educational experiences are provided, but they are carefully chosen and superbly executed.

Education would be so much more effective if its purpose were to ensure that by the time they leave school every boy and girl should know how much they don't know, and be imbued with a lifelong desire to know it.

Sir William Haley

Regular reviews of curriculum maps ensure that the school's practice is constantly aligned with the goals of the school and the needs of students for the future. This process is more than merely responding to educational fads. While Christian school people should not cling to practices long after their shortcomings have been exposed; neither should they find current fads so dazzling that pitfalls and

complexities are overlooked. Instead, they must go beyond tinkering to a full examination of what goals and practices enable their schools to be learner-focused, academically-sound, socially-responsible, and Christ-centered.

And education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't. It's knowing where to go to find out what you need to know; and it's knowing how to use the information you get.

William Feather

Because the possibilities are unlimited, Christian school people must select carefully. They figuratively "start from scratch" so that students are given a simple, clear, and coherent picture. Memorization of extraneous and soon-forgotten details is eliminated in favor of deeper understandings and the skills to find the details when needed. Decisions can be informed by consultation with a variety of relevant parties—parents and pastors, experts in their field and alumni, psychologists and educators, social workers and futurists. The priority is simply to *attend* to what is being done and reflect on the results for learners. Each school clarifies its vision in the light provided by Scripture and the saints and it uses the vision to lead, not push, parents, students, and staff into active participation. The best Christian schools know where they are going and how to get there.

1. How well does your school attend to regular institutional self-examination? What could be done better, and how?

2. What are some of the obstacles to a better alignment between vision and practice?
3. What structures could be put in place to ensure that practice reflects vision?



# AFFIRMATION 2

## Developing an Optimistic Theocentric Worldview

The Christian school community stresses the restorative power of God's grace in individual lives and within the world community. In an age of cynicism, fear, and hopelessness, Christian school people leave credit/debit theology to God and focus on redemption, restoration, and renewal—as seen in history, as depicted in literature, as celebrated by the church, and as lived out in the daily life of a grace-filled community.

## DEVELOPING AN OPTIMISTIC THEO-CENTRIC WORLDVIEW

EXPOSITION: Christians who paint too grim a picture of the world need to remember that the world is not going around and around meaninglessly; nor is it headed for hell in a handbasket. Some tend to be so distracted by current crises that they forget that God is holding the whole world in his hand, that he is redeeming it through Christ, and that he is establishing his kingdom through the power of his Spirit. Our world belongs to God!

Fatalistic Christians should trust their theology and rest in God. They should leave who's-in-who's-out questions to God, letting him decide the specifics of salvation. They should remember that nothing we do adds to or detracts from what Christ has already done. We are saved by grace. Or, as someone once put it, "deserves ain't got nothin' to do with it." The only response that makes sense is living a life of gratitude.

The point is that if we truly believe that God is saving and sovereign, then nothing, including the Christian schooling enterprise, is done out of fear or despair. Christians are people on a faith journey: embraced by God, forgiven, redeemed, and set on a path toward healing. Sometimes the road is rocky and steep and dark. Sometimes brokenness and doubt overwhelm. Sometimes the universe seems random and senseless. But those going through the valley are upheld by God and by the Christian community. They can unveil their struggles without fear of rejection.

Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort and letting it be there until some light returns.

Anne Lamott

With these twin supports of faith and community, Christian school people are free to happily pursue alternatives to the cynicism, fear, and hopelessness of the age. Words foreign to the world—*redemption*, *restoration*, *renewal*, and *reconciliation*—are daily realities to them. Forgiveness empowers. Life has meaning and purpose. History has an arc that ends in a new heaven and a new earth. Such understandings give a powerful freedom found nowhere else—not in a person or a policy or a political party, not in any earthly thing.

Embody the kingdom—wherever we are—  
not out of despair, but out of hope,  
not out of cynicism, but out of compassion,  
not out of duty, but out of gratitude,  
not out of burden, but out of forgiveness,  
not out of fatigue, but out of faith.

Roger Allen Nelson

People and the planet no longer need to be exploited, because self-preservation is no longer the highest priority. Christian school people must treat all people, including people of other faiths and cultures, as God's image-bearers and treat the planet as God's creation entrusted to their stewardship for future generations. Conflict resolution and the pursuit of peace must be consciously and deliberately taught and practiced in classrooms and hallways,

in homes and churches, and in the local community and the wider world.

We need a renaissance of wonder. We need to renew, in our hearts and in our souls, the deathless dream, the eternal poetry, the perennial sense that life is miracle and magic.

E. Merrill Root

This optimistic theo-centric worldview is not to be branded as liberal idealism and dismissed. Christians know that "progressive" humanity will never reach the utopia it seeks, because it cannot defeat evil. Only Christ can do that. He has done that already in his resurrection. And he will do so completely upon his return. In the meantime, we live and work in the centrality of Christ and his work on our behalf: a new world, full of hope and expectation.

1. To what extent does fatalism, despair, or fear characterize your school's culture?
2. What is the foundation for living in hope and gratitude? How can this foundation be conveyed to students?
3. Which school structures and activities can cultivate an optimistic, theo-centric worldview?

# AFFIRMATION 3

## Cultivating Cultural Discernment

Trusting the Holy Spirit's leading in the life of the community, Christian schooling offers opportunities and provides guidance to exercise discernment—the making of informed Christian choices. Christian school people navigate a money-and-media-dominated culture to get to biblical worldview and Christlike living. When community members disagree, they commit to preserving their relationship and continuing in conversation.

## CULTIVATING CULTURAL DISCERNMENT

EXPOSITION: Different living begins with discernment, the ability to see in a way that many in contemporary society do not, to make choices in values and lifestyle that honor people and glorify God, and then to live out those choices in concrete, life-enhancing ways. Acquiring such discernment is a painstaking process that never really ends. We must always try to attain wisdom, to get it right—not out of a need to feel superior, not out of the expectation that wisdom gets us to heaven, but because we’ve been shown a better way and we want to make it our own.

We have historically emphasized schooling as head knowledge. We talk of developing young minds. We focus on facts. But this understanding neglects the rich Hebrew idea of *knowing as doing*, in which nothing is properly known until it shapes and affects behavior. Students in the Christian school are given opportunities to show that they discern, that they truly know something, by acting in a way that proves the new understandings have been internalized. They must try to live differently, and they must be able to tell you why.

A mature person is one who does not think only in absolutes, who is able to be objective even when deeply stirred emotionally, who has learned that there is both good and bad in all people and in all things, and who walks humbly and deals charitably with the circumstances of life, knowing that in this world no one is all knowing and therefore all of us need both love and charity.

Eleanor Roosevelt

Thus, Christian school people must face squarely the hard choices that need to be made in a broken world. They must marshal evidence, seek multiple perspectives, weigh reasons, listen to the Spirit, decide courageously, and act. To best frame such inquiries, they rediscover the meaning of *idolatry*. They are constantly attuned to its cultural and institutional presence. They critically discern its place in hearts, in schools and churches, in political systems, and in national or community allegiance. But they go beyond targeting the real but easy marks—profanity, substance abuse, sexual indiscretion—and wrestle with culture-wide idolatry such as money’s exaggerated role in decision-making, faith in technology to solve all problems, gender/racial inequality, or military solutions to conflict.

The avoiding [of God] in many times and places has proved so difficult that a very large part of the human race failed to achieve it. But in our own time and place it is extremely easy. Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health, and (above all) on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of sedation. If you must read books, select them carefully. But you’d be safer to stick to the newspapers. You’ll find the advertisements helpful; especially those with a sexy or snobbish appeal.

C.S. Lewis

Right thinking, however, does not necessarily lead to right living. Examples of such are all around us. Something beyond an intellectual process is needed. We learn from examples, from people *modeling* different living. We absorb many of our values and lifestyle choices from our families and communities.

We learn from what is going on around us. As Albert Einstein said, "Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing." Christian school people, thus, must pay close attention to what is being modeled. They show students that their lives need not be dictated by money and the media and that they have the opportunity to defy the mass mind of society, to put to death their fabricated selves, and to live differently, authentically, and faithfully.

The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes all political and social life a mass illness. Without this housecleaning we cannot begin to see. Unless we can see, we cannot think.

Thomas Merton

Providing such opportunities, fostering the taking of such responsibility, and expecting such growth is risky business. Failure is a genuine, even daily, possibility. But failure is okay in Christian schooling. Given the chance, we can learn from failure. Although we all fail in the moral arena, we do not sacrifice each other on the altar of our respectability. Instead, we nurture those who have made mistakes. Such a grace-filled environment is a prerequisite for growth of any kind.

As one can easily imagine, in this context of risky freedom, the Christian school is not a complacent place. Christian school people must stick their necks out, trust where others would say "that's crazy," and leap into situations of greater service and vulnerability that would frighten others. They must read more, reflect more, and risk more—hoping to accomplish something with their lives that will live on for the glory of God.

1. How should we navigate a "money-and-media dominated culture"?
2. What are ways the school community can provide students with a biblical worldview and develop in them a discerning lifestyle?
3. How should the school deal with moral failure? How can it provide "risky freedom" without paying too high a price?



# AFFIRMATION 4

## Fostering Caring Engagement

Christian schooling preserves the full range of God-given emotions and cultivates the desire to engage with and care for others. Concepts of stewardship, peace-making, justice, and compassion are translated into practice. In the face of sensory overload (which distracts, desensitizes, and numbs), it prevents community members from becoming flat-souled people by providing life-giving opportunities for sabbath and service.

## FOSTERING CARING ENGAGEMENT

**EXPOSITION:** A flat-souled person is a person who does not care. A flat-souled person is saturated with stimuli but, having no criteria for how to respond, reacts to everything the same way: with relative indifference. A flat-souled person needs stuff and activity and amusement. The TV, computer, or phone is always on and streaming constantly. This person will further need to step up the stimulation, resulting in madder music, stronger wine, faster cars, and bloodier movies. He or she can easily default to disrespect and sarcasm and detachment.

Flat-souled people have lost the idea of *Sabbath*—a time of rest, quiet, meditation, and reflection—and its ability to restore meaning and purpose, to center us and ground us. Instead, distractions must be pervasive and constant. Such living dulls the capacity for feeling genuine emotions or for long, deep, and meaningful thinking. For them, profit, convenience, and comfort matter more than a common life. All modern people, including Christian school people, are powerfully influenced to be uncritically accepting. We all, to some degree, are flat-souled.

When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people. Now I admire kind people.

Abraham Heschel

Christian schooling is designed to serve up an antidote so that Christian school people can be moved by their surroundings. They will know that life matters, that the world has meaning, and that choices

have consequences. They will agonize and thrill over these choices. They will experience shame and elation. They will have a healthy awe, often wordless but apparent, when they see God's grace in the birth of a child, a sunset, an electrifying sentence, an act of selflessness, and the healing of brokenness.

In a fallen world, lay grip on the meanest edge of the dark issues and trim them into decency.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Christian school people can have an emotional life because words like *sin*, *salvation*, and *service* are at their core. They live with Christ, who embodies an alternative of wholeness, sacrifice, joy, and compassion. Christian school people keep that alternative before students, and, by being a living example, witness to its superiority. They recover the idea of sabbath, of rest, knowing that such is critical in a culture that would sweep us away.

There is so much coldness in the world because we do not dare to be as cordial as we really are.

Albert Schweitzer

Compassion is especially important. Affluence can easily isolate and insulate us from the desperate needs of the world. The Christian school tries to give suffering a human face. Through curriculum design, school structures, special exchanges, excursions, and travel, the school brings the sufferers before the school community and/or transports the students to the sufferers.

Furthermore, people are not the only object of caring engagement. Yes, we are here to take care of each other. We are also here to take care of a place. Wendell Berry wrote well about the importance of knowing a place, settling in and caring for it. Our high mobility society makes such place-caring difficult. Christian school people care for something as big as "God's creation," but they begin with their own place, their own community, their own bioregion, making sure that all is healthy and enriching.

Although "fixing what's wrong" is key to caring engagement, the Christian school also engages at all levels, not just what needs to be fixed. Culture is not only discerned and critiqued, it is created. Culture is engaged in movies and music, in art and politics, in business and leisure. Christian school people ask and wonder how all areas of life can be enhanced and enjoyed, how every area of life can be the arena for God's goodness, and how all people can benefit. Making a fantastic movie that provides entertainment and insight or building a business that provides a livelihood for employees is also a way to restore and renew the world.

1. What in current society tends to make us "flat-souled"?
2. What structures and activities can cultivate in students authentic caring for people?
3. What structures and activities can cultivate in students authentic caring for a place?

# AFFIRMATION 5

## Preparing for and Participating In A Changing World

Christian school people take the future seriously by confronting the realities of how and where and with whom and to what end they will spend their lives. As enormous and rapid change continues—in families, in churches, in the environment, and in society—the Christian school experience equips all not only to live in such a world but also to transform it to reflect Christ's kingdom of faith, hope, and love.

## PREPARING FOR AND PARTICIPATING IN A CHANGING WORLD

EXPOSITION: Christian school people prepare students for rubbing elbows with a diverse and multicultural population. They become *rooted cosmopolitans*: "rooted" in that they know and value their heritage—its values, its worldview, its traditions, its Christian foundation—and "cosmopolitan" in that they are able to relate to, and certainly respect if not actively appreciate, all ethnic and cultural groups. They see the limitations of their own tribal culture and do not confuse biblical norms with their own ethnic, political, or economic norms. They cultivate an international orientation that diminishes provincialism while preserving roots and anchor points.

We educate for an imagined future. Historically in the Western mindset and increasingly around the world, the image of the future is an escalator, carrying all up to ever-increasing levels of consumption. Whether that can or will happen is under debate: Are we approaching the limits of what the planet can endure, or will technology and our own ingenuity help us to avert ecological disaster? In a planet trashed by unrestrained consumerism and in an economy dependent on the same, is there even an imagined future to consider?

The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

William Sloan Coffin

Regardless, we have certainly learned that we need to shift our thinking about environmental

protection and social well-being. Caring for the planet *is* caring for people. The environment is breaking down so fast that the question is not whether something must be done but whether institutions, political processes, values, and human resolve can change fast enough to confront and alleviate environmental crises.

Christian school people must raise that awareness and take the necessary action, not simply because of the seriousness of our predicament but because it is ethically and spiritually the right thing to do. Christian stewardship of the planet provides the rationale for simpler living, recycling, using appropriate technology, supporting clean water and healthy food sources, conserving energy, and protecting habitat. Christian schooling corporately and Christian school people individually must promote and follow such specifics.

Technology is so much fun but we can drown in our technology. The fog of information can drive out knowledge.

Daniel J. Boorstin

Christian school people must strive to learn about the world realistically; this approach makes them wiser and more competent in world affairs, and enables them to transcend nationalism and economic competitiveness to appreciate and practice mutual understanding and cooperation. They face the world's many philosophies and come to know which customs and parts of traditions have good content for living a whole Christian life.

If it is at church that we make our choice for Christ, it is at school that we keep making that choice always more humanly and culturally and practically significant.

Henry Zylstra

The future also requires a deep awareness and understanding of technology's role in our lives. We are faced with an ever-growing availability and utilization of technology. Today's children, born digital, live in a media-rich and networked world. On one hand, the opportunities to engage the global community are infinite. On the other hand, studies are showing that too much screen time leads to obesity and short attention spans. The Christian school community wrestles with how to help learners understand that their digital lifestyle is about more than just cool gadgets. It is about how to use them for self-directed learning, engagement, and empowerment. It is about using powerful tools for more than amusement and using them instead to expand learning and create a better world.

1. What have been some of the most dramatic and rapid social changes in your school community? What effects do these have on the students?
2. Do your students generally need to be more "rooted" or more "cosmopolitan"?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages for students of today's technologies?

# AFFIRMATION 6

## Addressing Real Problems and Generating Real Products

Christian schooling offers learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant. Because Christian school people strive to see the world with clear-eyed honesty, they seek whole life stewardship in which work is worship and brokenness is healed. Vocation-minded people penetrate the status quo and work for Christian alternatives that replace injustices and failures with peace and beauty.

## ADDRESSING REAL PROBLEMS AND GENERATING REAL PRODUCTS

EXPOSITION: Genuine problems motivate people personally and corporately. Christian schooling certainly allows for and promotes individual well-being and personal flourishing, but it does so with the understanding that God’s work is underway, that the arc of history is reaching toward renewal and restoration. Christian schooling exposes the world’s needs—the history and development of problems, along with their possible solutions—and then tries to find ways to act, individually or corporately, to address the needs. Such action not only has an impact on the societal problem but also empowers students, who sense that they can influence their world and shape their future.

One way students are empowered is by seeing that their efforts in school have recognizable, valued results. Too often students write papers without an audience, do mathematics without context, pursue science without purpose, and read books without a result. When genuine products are generated—scripts for video productions, soil analysis for a garden, speeches for government hearings, the logistics of a community service program, music for a school celebration, essays for a magazine, a business plan for a school-based venture, research for a better understanding of a family problem—students are much more engaged in their learning.

The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.

Plutarch

Producing tangible products can be an undiscovered joy in schooling systems where head knowledge and good test scores are the only learning that is valued. Schools typically have a one-channel system that forces all students on to four-year university after high school. The drop-out rates for high school and college remain high and give cause to wonder if alternatives make more sense for some students.

Christian schools must recognize that vocational skills are highly related to giftedness. Students who have the ability to do incredible work with their hands will also have opportunities to develop their skills in the context of Christian schooling. Problem solving is taught as well in shop class or a mechanic's garage as in math class or a science lab. Succeeding in the variety of mechanical, physical, and cultural contexts exemplifies intelligence every bit as important as that found in a purely academic world, and the products that are generated are every bit as valuable.

When schools erase the artificial categories of what is academic, what is aesthetic, and what is vocational, they reach more deeply to tap more talents in more students. Daniel Pink, addressing motivation in students, observes

The idea is that for simple, rule-based, routine tasks, carrot-and-stick motivators work fine. But for more complicated, complex tasks, they don't work so well, and autonomy, mastery, and purpose work better. Autonomy is our desire to be self-directed, to direct our own lives and to have some agency and control over what we do. Mastery is our desire to get better and better at something. And finally, purpose is our desire to do what we do in service of something

larger than ourselves. The science indicates that these three motivators are what really lead to enduring motivation for most tasks, but especially for the more complicated things that folks in school today are going to be doing when they get into the work force.

Study without desire spoils the meaning, and it retains nothing that it takes in.

Leonardo Da Vinci

Such attention to autonomy, mastery, and purpose enables Christian schools to prepare students for a variety of possibilities after high school to serve in a variety of ways to meet a variety of the world's needs.

Rewards and punishments are the lowest form of education.

Chuang-tzu

1. What is the best way to incorporate "addressing problems" into the curricular foundation of a school?
2. What could "tangible" and "valued" products be at your school?
3. How could the school become more than a "purely academic" world?

# AFFIRMATION 7

## Building Essential Understandings and Life Skills

The Christian school community has an ongoing dialogue about what is essential and how we use knowledge to grow in wisdom. Christian school people know the story of God and his people, the central realities of the natural world, the expressions of the larger culture, and a sense of history and of how the world works. They practice skills such as reflection, initiative, creativity, perseverance, collaboration, and lifelong learning.

## BUILDING ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND LIFE SKILLS

**EXPOSITION:** The work of Christian schooling is to craft curriculum as "a journey toward wisdom" in which the formation of a way of life is more important than the accumulation of information. Wisdom cannot be learned in the abstract. It is not a set of universal principles that can be packaged and then applied to any situation. It is a responsive discipleship (Christ-following) in the real world, in culturally-situated, historically-defined contexts. Wisdom is more than thinking.

Learners are invited to be attentive to and to explore the kaleidoscopic complexity and fascinating interdependence of the world, to seek to understand how the mysterious interdependence is shaped, and to consider how they might live in right relationship with each other and the world. Learners need to encounter whole things in their many-sidedness—objects, plants, persons, institutions, acts, events—rather than just conclusions, abstractions, or summations about those things. A study of wetlands, for instance, begins with an extended encounter with a local wetland so that students experience its many aspects. As students and teacher engage in a cycle of question/answer/counter-question around the perspectives of conservationists, biologists, developers, and community members, they learn, understand the results, and answer the question "How should we then live?"

I don't buy the notion that the world is organized the way universities and companies are. Ideas don't know what discipline they're in.

Gerald Zaltman

Crafting such learning experiences requires wisdom and discernment. The essential understandings related to a particular unit of study and those that are central to living a life of responsive discipleship are identified, articulated, and incorporated. Once the understandings are identified, curriculum designers organize experiences and "texts" that can open up possibilities and provide varied means for learners to share their learning. Beyond initial planning, curriculum users need alertness and flexibility to reshape curriculum as students and teacher listen to each other and attend closely to what they are experiencing and studying.

For the history that I require and design, special care is to be taken that it will be of wide range and made to the measure of the universe. For the world is not to be narrowed till it will go into the understanding (which has been done hitherto), but the understanding is to be expanded and opened till it can take in the image of the world.

Francis Bacon

Christian school people must also help learners develop essential skills: emotional intelligence that will enable them to empathize with coworkers and to control harmful impulses, critical thinking to help them solve problems for which there are no routine solutions, and high level communication skills that enable them to explain, interpret, and persuade. Christian school people must help learners to expand

their ability to focus, to exhibit self-control, to make connections, to become self-directed, to take on challenges, and to stay with something for the long haul.

Essential life skills also include imagining and creating. These equally important life skills are too often lost in schools because students are simply told what to do next and are then afraid of making mistakes or not doing it "right." If creativity is as important as literacy, then schooling must also focus on maturing creative skills instead of educating learners out of their creative capacity. Pablo Picasso once said all children are artists; the goal is to remain an artist as we grow up.

The brain is a three-pound mass you can hold in your hand that can conceive of a universe a hundred billion light years across.

Marian C. Diamond

Finally, essential life skills must include the desire and ability to be a lifelong learner. Educational structures can encourage a dependency on the school. Students come to believe that they cannot "learn" without a "teacher" in a "classroom" who gives "assignments" that the student "does" to get a "grade." Christian schooling enthusiastically encourages and actively teaches independent lifelong learning, thus preparing students for a future in which social and political realities will constantly change, in which jobs and careers will require constant retraining, and in which greater leisure and longevity will offer new opportunities as well as changing responsibilities.

1. What are the "essential understandings" needed for today's world?
2. What are, or should be, today's "texts"?
3. What are the "essential skills" needed for today's world?



# AFFIRMATION 8

## Attending to Each Individual's Development

Christian schooling pays attention to and affirms each person's gifts and opportunities, potential, and capacity. Learning strengths are identified, and people are positioned for personal, educational, professional, and vocational success. Pedagogy is first of all effective and meaningful for the student, not convenient and manageable for the teacher.

## ATTENDING TO EACH INDIVIDUAL'S DEVELOPMENT

EXPOSITION: We know that school should not be an assembly line, but bells, large groups, class schedules, uniform pre-packaged curricula, and regimentation indicate that, like it or not, most schools still resemble factories. The assumption is that each student is exactly like every other and learns at the same rate in the same manner with the same skills with the same pressures and faced with the same obstacles.

We know better. Students are not uniform. Each has different learning strengths. Each learns at a different rate. Each is motivated in a different way and to a different degree. Each carries personal and social baggage that can prevent learning. And some students will never learn some things.

Learning too soon our limitations, we never learn our powers.

Mignon McLaughlin

So how do we provide learning experiences for all these moving targets? How do we personalize, individualize, and customize learning so that all receive the maximum benefit? Is it possible to replace the factory production model with a sophisticated system for identifying and cultivating gifts? Can we go beyond differentiated instruction with an academic emphasis to learning experiences that take into account ethnic and socio-economic and cultural differences?

I think people don't place a high enough value on how much they are nurtured by doing whatever it is that totally absorbs them.

Jean Shinoda Bolen

Christian schooling begins by identifying a student's learning strengths (using, for example, the seven dimensions of the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory – ELLI) and welcoming the student's interests. Schools often require that students read, write, compute, and study everything *except* what matters most to them: who they are and what they want to do with their lives. Children seldom question teacher expectations; they question their own adequacy. Christian schools must build on strengths.

We never understand a thing so well, and make it our own, as when we have discovered it for ourselves.

Rene Descartes

The Christian school community accepts and cherishes each child as an image-bearer of God bestowed with talents and inherent importance. When students are accepted no matter how intelligent or slow, how cooperative or belligerent, how gifted or disadvantaged, or how spiritually sensitive or calloused, they learn they can take the risks necessary to grow intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. They develop the confidence in their ability to act in their own behalf and the willingness to extend their efforts to the larger society, even the world.

The Christian schooling community must be suspicious of the "disorder" culture we have created, in which students are labeled as having various "defi-

cits" that prevent them from "normal" learning routines. Christian school people must attend to current brain research, always looking for ways to unleash the child's natural learning power, hoping *more* curricular goals can be translated into reality for *more* students.

Set me a task in which I can put something of my very self, and it is a task no longer; it is joy, it is art.

Bliss Carman

Such brain research seems to indicate that the brain acts according to certain rules, such as every brain is different, the brain does not pay attention to boring things, stressed brains don't learn as well, exercise boosts brain power, and vision trumps all other senses. Such understandings about how students learn may require different facilities, new organizational structures, flexible schedules, better technology, and more work on the part of the staff, but it is meaningful work. And as the drudgery decreases, the rewards increase.

1. How can we better accommodate the varying learning needs, styles, and rates of our students?
2. How can we avoid the comparing, the judging, and the labeling that can inhibit learning?
3. What are the implications of the latest brain research for schooling?

# AFFIRMATION 9

## Promoting Christian Community

The Christian school is a community in which covenant, not contract, is the foundation for relationships. People are not simply trading money for services, grades for good behavior, or a diploma for seat time. Trust, cooperation, and shared seriousness for the task characterize all interactions. Christian community means not only worshipping and celebrating but also widening the tent and welcoming the stranger.

## PROMOTING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

**EXPOSITION:** Covenant, a fundamental biblical idea, is an agreement that entails a special allegiance. Biblically, God says, "I will be your God," and people respond, "We will be your people." Covenant in the Christian school community suggests a particular loyalty to the cause. The entire community, not just parents, recognize the importance of this kind of education for both community and kingdom, and they devote to it time and resources and prayer.

Genuine biblical community is inclusive. It not only permits outsiders; it harbors them. It is a place of safety and nurture where uniqueness is celebrated, not ridiculed, where conflict is resolved without physical or emotional violence. People in community are allowed to be weak, to doubt, and to risk and fail without rejection. Such acceptance requires a humility and vulnerability uncommon in society but very much present in the Body of Christ.

Christian school people must be wary of the competitive one-upmanship that has characterized schooling for so long. They must be suspicious of the culture of exceptionality that declares that my child and my school and my tribe must rise above the rest. Instead, learners in the Christian school community must support and challenge each other, intentionally taking the side of the struggling and marginalized, watching the importance of individual grades and accomplishments fade as commitment to all takes on greater importance.

In a democracy, we need a few reality checkpoints at which we all crowd together, nabob and yahoo, and rub elbows and get a clue about who lives here other than us.

Garrison Keillor

Specifically, Christian school people cultivate biblical community through open communication, understanding, and acceptance. The Christian school community must not use enemy formation to foster oneness. There is no room for us-them thinking. They must imitate the Christlike tendency of always extending the gospel farther and wider, offering it to those not normally considered in the circle. The resulting learning environment will be thoughtful, free, sharing, and respectful, rather than competitive, tense, self-serving, and fearful.

Not to know is bad. Not to want to know is worse. Not to hope is unthinkable. Not to care is unforgivable.

Nigerian saying

Fundamentally, community is where grief is shared and born and where joy is acknowledged and celebrated. Christian school people carry each other's burdens. They sing a song of resurrection. Through this sharing, as Lucy Winkett writes, "We are saved from our sin of self-preservation at all costs that separates us from God. We are saved from the mire of mixed motives, selfish ambition and violent competition that disfigures our lives. We are saved from the vacuous over-activity that characterizes a frightened life, and from the temptation born of insecurity to trivialize and dehumanize others."

I want all the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

Mahatma Gandhi

Thus, all is not hand-wringing, lament, and worry about brokenness. Christian school people celebrate together. In worship they celebrate God's sustaining hand in creation, his great faithfulness, and his mercies that are new every morning. Realizing that all work is done in response to God, they commemorate learners who faithfully put forward their best effort, persevered through difficulties, or reached new areas of growth.

Before formulating a worldview, it's important to get out and view the world.

John Rasmus

Specifically, the classroom itself reflects such community because students and teachers form a community of learners. Competitive one-upmanship is replaced by a culture of support and challenge and celebration. Deeper understanding has greater value than high test scores or individual grades. The community of learners has special interest in the struggling or marginalized in its midst. Work and learning is worship.

1. What should it mean that we "covenant" together as a community to provide Christian schooling?
2. How do we go about "widening the tent" and "extending the gospel" in our school community?

3. How can the community recognize and celebrate all gifts, all graces, all blessings, and all accomplishments?



# AFFIRMATION 10

## Recasting Traditional Roles

Christian schooling allows for people's strengths and artistry to be fully utilized. Members of the Christian school community—students, too—relate to each other as facilitators and collaborators in several ways at several levels. All are learners and leaders, donors and keepers of the vision, and instigators and entrepreneurs.

## RECASTING TRADITIONAL ROLES

**EXPOSITION:** What is the role of a human being? Observers of our culture might consider where we spend our time and effort and conclude that the role of a human being is to push product. Christian school people expand the role in many new and wonderful God-given directions, but perhaps one stands out: the role we have as human beings is to take care of each other. How can everyone, regardless of professional position, play that role better?

While there will probably always be designated roles in the schooling experience—teacher, administrator, student, parent/guardian, board member, community leader—such roles could be profitably blurred in Christian schooling for a better learning community. Teachers should be given the freedom and responsibility to exercise their expertise and artistry as models of how students should learn and live. Teachers are not simply dispensers of information; they are facilitators, guides, and coaches. Administrators are like baseball managers who have enough faith in their players to let them play the game but who also have enough of a sense for their players' skills to put them into situations where they are most likely to succeed. Students then are no longer passive recipients but scholars who seize responsibility for their learning, co-creating their experiences for greater depth and significance.

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

At home, parents or guardians perform a gigantic cheerleading role in their child's education by providing everything from enthusiasm to a place to work. Board members are rock solid in their understanding and unwavering in their support for the school's mission, finding and funding new ways to unleash their community's learning power. Together these Christian school people will pursue their passionate quest. Their love for God shows in a daily Enoch-like walk. Their love for learning is scholarship at its best. Their excitement and intimate fun is contagious. They clearly love the Lord, the learning experience, and each other. They are contributors to and participants in the learning process, not simply critics, judges, and evaluators. The students watch these models and imitate them.

You owe it to us all to get on with what you're good at.

W.H. Auden

Leaders in such schools have recast traditional roles by distributing leadership throughout the learning organization. While sensitive to the ever-present issues of power and control and turf, they try to move beyond such. They create a culture of cooperation and service. They ask and provide resources for teachers and staff to actively and frequently collaborate around evidence of student learning. These learner-centered collaborative teams focus on three essential questions: What do we want our students to understand, know, and do? How will we know what and how well our students are learning? How can we turn our curricular priorities into reality for all of our students—those who learn quickly and those who do not?

Happiness is the full use of your powers along the lines of excellence.

John F. Kennedy

As all engage in this kind of collaboration, all, in varying degrees, take responsibility for the learning of all students, all become researchers of their own practice, all engage in curricular decision-making, all become skilled interpreters of evidence of student learning and all determine how their contribution to the Christian schooling enterprise can be improved. The goal, as always, is skillful performance and deep understanding . . . for the glory of God, the restoration of his world.

1. How can "strengths and artistry" be better utilized in your school?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of "blurring roles" or reconsidering traditional hierarchical models?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of "distributing leadership through the learning organization"? How could that be done?

# AFFIRMATION 11

## Structuring Schools to Support Learning

The Christian school is the product of thoughtfulness and dialogue and determination. School practices—from calendar and schedules to book selection and learning experiences, from expectations and assessments to values and school culture—reflect the best of what’s known about creating spaces for learning. School structures both reflect and shape the life of gratitude to God.

## STRUCTURING SCHOOLS TO SUPPORT LEARNING

EXPOSITION: There is no excuse for boredom. People who are good at something are usually happy. People who think their work is important are likely to be pleurably engaged in it and find it rewarding. But too often students are listless and teachers are burned out. Christian school people should not tolerate such a malaise in the school. Schooling and growth are exciting because God is so good, creation is so interesting, the world so fascinating, the work to be done so important, and the possibilities so endless.

Schoolwork is God-given; it is a calling. Meaningful learning is a moral obligation. The Christian school community celebrates the wonders of knowledge and thought, of investigation and experimentation, of doing good in the world and creating beautiful things. It does not isolate and control and protect by using false pretenses. It does not fear inquiry. It does not practice selectivity by giving students only the "right" answers. It is always exploring, further and deeper, God's ways in the world.

To live in the presence of great truths and eternal laws, to be led by permanent ideals—that is what keeps a man patient when the world ignores him, and calm and unspoiled when the world praises him.

Honore de Balzac

To do so Christian school people must give careful thought to the kind of learning spaces their students need to thrive. A testing culture depresses learning and therefore should be replaced with a learning

culture. They must deliberate about how to create an environment that opens up rather than limits possibilities, that invites active, authentic participation rather than promoting passivity, that encourages community not isolation, that nurtures creativity and imagination instead of compliance.

Christian school people should strive to be less concerned with control and perpetuation and more concerned about creating spaces where learners flourish. They must determine to create learning spaces that translate their mission into concrete practices in the life of the learning community. Components include all the nuts and bolts that compose the school's structures: room size and furniture placement, technology and its use, governance and oversight, staff positions and their functions, curriculum maps and "texts," special events and school culture, assessments and quality control, calendars and scheduling.

Almost all really new ideas have a certain aspect of foolishness when they are first produced.

Alfred North Whitehead

The learning process is varied, consisting of sights and sounds, abstractions and details, practice and correction. The most potent forms of learning are often "extra-intellectual," taking place out of the school building. They are found in those experiences that shape students dramatically, sometimes in a moment, giving energy, commitment, motivation, and determination that can sustain efforts for a lifetime.

It has been said, and I think it's true, that all professional organizations are conspiracies against the public. Beyond that, all professional associations are conspiracies against the self because they basically narrow the context of your investigation and demand a kind of allegiance to certain modes of thought.

Milton Glaser

Christian school people can design such experiences by planning, by taking the time and putting forth the effort to envision what such learning spaces will be. Because Christian school people know the truth of Winston Churchill's comment "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us," they find the time and money to make the dialogue happen. Real-life laboratories—out-of-classroom experiences, learning excursions, student and teacher exchanges, distance learning, internships, and educational travel—are emphasized as essential to learning.

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.

Leo Tolstoy

The learning spaces in the Christian school must not isolate. Christian school people must recognize the interrelatedness and connections between classroom activity and the larger world. Breaking down any barriers between the two not only makes for powerful learning, it prepares students for living and making a difference when they move beyond the Christian school community. "Ships are safest in a harbor, but that's not what ships are for."

1. What can be done to make learning and growing as exciting as it deserves to be and as effective as it needs to be?
2. What aspects of the physical environment could be improved?
3. What out-of-classroom experiences are worth the effort?



# AFFIRMATION 12

## Growing Responsive Learning Communities

The Christian school community institutionalizes in a way that is small, nimble, and transparent. It is continually responsive to God's Spirit, the cultural context, and the needs of all learners. It is a "un-institution" that continuously seeks a more excellent way by planning and structuring for improvement. Commendable practices are emphasized; undeserving ones are de-emphasized.

## GROWING RESPONSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

EXPOSITION: Christian schooling should strive to be an "un-institution"—not rigid, inflexible, or set in its ways. It should continually transform itself to adapt to society's demands and any new understandings of how students learn, yet it should maintain a fierce allegiance to its reason for existence: educating young people to joyfully flourish in a way that honors God, helps people, and improves the world.

The "un-institution" is fluid and responsive because it has to be—the world is changing fast. This effort requires time, money, good communication, and leadership. Worthy ideas must be kept under discussion by all involved. While those seeking change should allow others to save face, those skeptical of change must allow others to take risks. Trust is built on the belief that the Spirit speaks through the Body of Christ and not just through a single interpretation by one person or a few. The Christian school mission is continually examined (Affirmation One) so that a comfortable system is not mistaken for the best system.

The worst thing is to improve what shouldn't be done at all.

Peter Drucker

Such openness to adapting quickly can be worrisome. Change is frightening because it makes the world seem less predictable; change is threatening because it implies that what exists now is inadequate; change is embarrassing because it sometimes

requires admitting and understanding anew one's past errors. Change moves us out of our comfort zone and through zones of uncertainty. But we don't have the option of *whether* to change or not. We are changing and adapting constantly. The only question is whether we control change by making choices deliberately and consciously or whether we blindly and passively suffer the potentially cataclysmic effects of a changing world.

Parker Palmer observed that leaders stand in the tragic gap between current reality and the envisioned future. They deserve support. Christian school people come alongside them, pro-active rather than re-active. They dream. They conceptualize solutions to solve problems. They talk with everyone affected and respect those points of view. They pursue the solutions, but they realize the whole process takes effort and that half-heartedness will not work. All are able to contend gracefully, to disagree, and still remain in community.

The best way to show a stick is crooked is not to argue about it or to spend time denouncing it, but to lay a straight stick alongside it.

Archbishop Janani Luwum

To accomplish the Christian schools of our ideals, the advice is simple: Clarify and apply a mission statement. Develop an optimistic theo-centric worldview. Cultivate cultural discernment. Foster cultural engagement. Prepare for and participate in a changing world. Address real problems and generate real products. Build essential understandings and life skills. Attend to each individual's development. Promote Christian community. Recast traditional roles. Structure schools to support learning. Grow responsive learning communities.

Do not wait for great strength before setting out, for immobility will weaken you further. Do not wait to see clearly before starting: one has to walk toward the light. When you take that first step, accomplish that tiny little act, the necessity of which may only be apparent to you, you will be astonished to feel that the effort, rather than exhausting your strength, has doubled it – and that you already see more clearly what you have to do next.

Philippe Vernier

And to keep everything in perspective at all times and in all places, we remember the words of Reinhold Niebuhr:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

1. How can a school be more "fluid" and "responsive" in the face of a changing environment?
2. How can people be "held" and supported when change is threatening, even frightening?
3. How can we stay optimistic and at peace when there will always be a gap between the ideal and the reality?

## About the Author



Steven C. Vryhof received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. His dissertation became *Between Memory and Vision: the case for faith-based schooling*. A former high school teacher and an adjunct professor at Calvin College, he has taught, written, and consulted widely on faith-based schooling. He was instrumental in founding Daystar School in Chicago and is the founder and executive director of the Daystar Center, offering educational, cultural, and professional development opportunities.

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