ACSI Flourishing Schools Research

2021 Australia Pilot Report

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ACSI

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Research Overview

Throughout Scripture the concept of flourishing is used to describe a state of being—one that always results from God's work with and upon communities of faith. The psalmist invokes the blessing in the Old Testament, "May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children" (Psalm 115:14). This blessing echoes in the words of Jesus when He told disciples, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10b). For Christian schools, the concept of "flourishing" offers a more expansive view of the purposes and processes of education—one that is well-suited to their holistic goals and outcomes.

While flourishing holds promise in terms of describing a desired condition and outcome of Christian education, key questions need to be answered if Christian schools are to realize this promise— namely, *how do Christian schools flourish? What elements of school culture contribute to flourishing, and do some elements matter more than others?* In 2018, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) sought to answer these questions through rigorous research on Christian school cultures by using a new research tool—the Flourishing School Culture Instrument (FSCI).

In total, the FSCI tested 1,445 discrete variables through surveying over 15,000 participants, spread across seven different survey groups: parents and guardians; alumni; teachers; leaders and administrators; support staff; board members; and current students (aged 11 and above). The sample size makes the FSCI the largest study of flourishing in Christian schools to date. Though schools were primarily located in the United States, 6% of schools were in the international context, and schools in the sample were diverse in terms of admissions policies (e.g., "covenantal," or requiring at least one parent to be a Christian, as well as "open admission," with no faith profession required of parents).

The resulting research is groundbreaking both in terms of its scope and findings and provides the basis for the first-ever empirically validated model of flourishing in Christian schools. In early 2020, a successful independent review to validate the rigor and methodological soundness of the FSCI was conducted by Cardus. Detailed information about instrument design and fielding can be found in the published report *Flourishing Schools: Research on Christian School Culture and Community* (Swaner, Marshall and Tesar 2019). The current report provides an overview of the instrument design and data analysis, the FSCM, the 2021 Australia pilot results, and understanding how the FSCI can be used in leading school-level change.

Instrument Design and Data Analysis

In order to develop a measure of school culture, questions for a pre-validated assessment were formed based on catalogued findings from an extensive review of relevant prior research and literature. The SPSS statistical package was used to evaluate the pre-validated assessment, analyzing respondent data from participating schools for the purposes of construct analysis, predictive modeling, and establishing the psychometric properties of the finalized instrument.

Construct Analysis

The data was approached without a preconceived theoretical framework to be validated. Instead, the data was allowed to speak for itself, revealing where the addition of an additional construct started to add little or no explanatory value. The constructs being identified are often referred to as latent constructs, which means simply that they are concepts that cannot be measured directly. The valid approach to measuring latent constructs is to evaluate a range of prompts that group together naturally, addressing an underlying idea from more than one frame. When factor analysis reveals that a set of measurements is factoring together, there is reason to explore whether a hidden or latent construct has been repeatably identified.

As these latent constructs are identified, it is important that the prompts belonging to any construct group primarily with that construct. If a prompt is shared in its natural grouping with any other of the latent constructs in a prospective model, it is key that the primary strength of affinity is with the reliant latent construct, rather than any other construct in the model. The final model was determined once all of these criteria exceeded established best practice benchmarks.

In terms of specific analysis procedures, the number of constructs for each assessment was determined by striving to maximize total variance explained by the fewest number of components. Factor analysis using the Principal Component Analysis method of extraction was used to confirm the aggregation of the question items in their dimension components. The optimal number of constructs was determined by calculating eigenvalues for the data set and specifically exploring where eigenvalues dropped below 1. The final number of constructs accepted for each assessment explains between 64.9 – 69.5% of overall variance. Principal Component Analysis using Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation method yielded a structure where all individual question items yielded primary loadings over .5, and not a single item yielded cross-loading above .3.

Predictive Modeling

In terms of linkages between these constructs and outcomes, the initial predictions detectable were identified using structural equation modeling (SEM) and logistic regression techniques. These techniques enable the model to be used to predict changes in desired outcomes if or when changes are made related to underlying latent constructs. The outcomes initially revealed by the model should not be confused with correlation relationships, which have no power to predict future outcomes. One outcome included in this analysis was student performance on standardized testing, though additional outcomes related to student retention, durability of student faith, and more were included in this robust outcomes exploration phase. In the end, various constructs across the model were found to have strong and specific predictive value for one or more meaningful flourishing outcomes.

The end result of data analysis was twofold. First, by excluding all items except those bearing statistical significance, the number of items per survey was reduced significantly. The resulting surveys are not only shorter and more administration-friendly, but also composed exclusively of questions that will yield data correlated with flourishing outcomes. The finalized Flourishing School Culture Instrument (FSCI) is no longer exploratory in nature, but now a correlative measure of school flourishing. Data from the FSCI has been used to generate school-level reports that provide insight

into schools' strengths, as well as areas schools can target via improvement initiatives and processes. Data from future administrations will also enable schools to track year-over-year progress, as well as broaden the sample and resulting data set.

Second, a validated model of school flourishing was developed from the final number of validated constructs for each group. These constructs were mapped onto the first ever research-based model of Christian school flourishing, the Flourishing School Culture Model (FSCM). The model is presented in the next section of this report.

Psychometric Properties

SPSS analysis was used to test the quantitative structural evidence for reliability and validity behind each question set. In the first round of analysis, evidence of divergent validity was used to immediately cut from the pre-validated assessment any question that highly correlated, either positively or negatively, with school size, respondent ethnicity, or overall school population diversity. This was done to avoid including a pseudo-psychometric concept inadvertently measuring a merely demographic factor.

Cronbach's alpha was then used to measure the overall reliability of each question set. Each assessment reached Cronbach's alpha level of between .788 to .882, with the exception of the board assessment (.544). As .700 is the preferred threshold for this measure, and .500 or above is acceptable, confidence in the reliability of these assessments is unusually high. Validity analysis (KMO – Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy) was conducted for the scaled outcome measures from each assessment. Each assessment reached a KMO of between .725 and .879, which again, are exceptionally high scores (.500 is acceptable for this type of assessment), indicating that the strength of the relationships among variables was high. Statistics for both reliability and validity along with the final number of items and validated constructs are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Psychometric Properties of FSCI Surveys by Group

Question Set	Number of Items	Reliability: Cronbach's Alpha (.500 or above acceptable; .700 or above desired)	Validity: KMO (.500 or above desired)	Final Number of Validated Constructs
Students	18	.788	.841	6
Parents	11	.806	.856	3
Alumni	12	.866	.879	4
Teachers	36	.882	.863	12
Leaders/Administrators	28	.870	.839	8
Support Staff	18	.794	.802	6
Board Members	15	.544	.724	5

The Flourishing School Culture Model (FSCM)

From this research, the resulting Flourishing School Culture Model, or FSCM, clusters 35 validated constructs for all seven survey groups into five domains of flourishing as follows:

- *Purpose*. A commitment on the part of all school constituencies to the central purposes of Christian education—such as holistic teaching, integrated worldview, spiritual formation, discipleship, and family-school partnership—is strongly linked to flourishing outcomes.
- *Relationships*. Trust-filled, supportive, and authentic relationships between all school constituencies, as well as with the surrounding community, are key to flourishing outcomes.
- *Teaching and Learning*. A school culture in which educators are committed to ongoing learning and improvement is linked to flourishing not only for the school and educators, but also for students.
- *Expertise and Resources*. Flourishing is connected to excellence in educational and school management practices.
- *Well-Being*. For both leaders and teachers at Christian schools, stress is a key factor that impacts flourishing; likewise, healthy living and developing resilience is linked to student flourishing. This domain and related constructs demonstrate that the well-being of educators and students is not a secondary concern—but rather is linked—to flourishing outcomes.

Taken together, these five domains provide a compelling and comprehensive picture of the areas in which Christian schools can focus their efforts and resources in order to promote a flourishing school culture and community (see Figure 1).
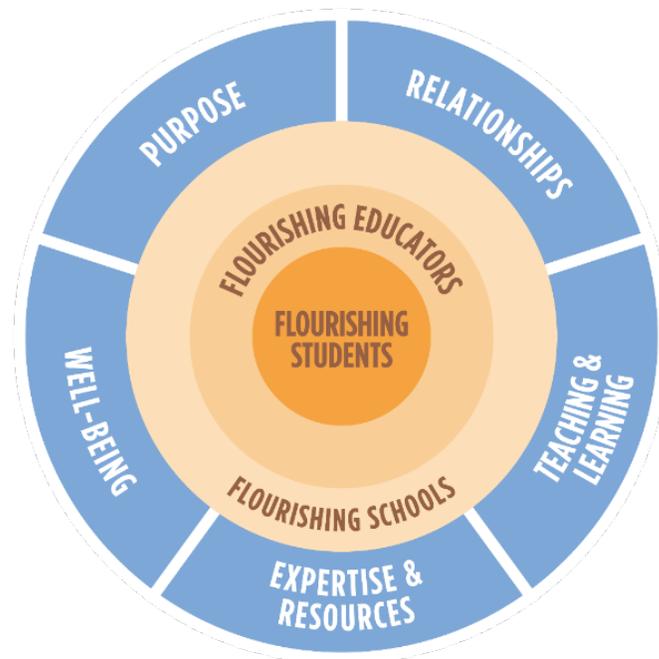
Figure 1. The Flourishing School Culture Model (FSCM), © ACSI 2021

As mentioned, the FSCM clusters 35 validated constructs for all seven survey groups into these five domains of flourishing. These constructs are defined, by domain, below.

Purpose Constructs

1. **Responsibility** – Leaders, teachers, and support staff feel a sense of shared ownership for school mission, success, and improvement.
2. **Holistic Teaching** – Teaching involves helping students develop spiritually and emotionally (teaching the heart and soul, as well as the mind).
3. **Integrated Worldview** – Christian worldview changes how we educate; there is no such thing as a secular sphere.
4. **God's Story** – Students believe they are a part of God's bigger plan and can be used by him to "make a difference."
5. **Questioning** – Students have doubts about their faith, lack time to pray or study the Bible, and feel that most Christians are too judgmental.
6. **Partnership** – Families feel they are a part of the school's mission, and that their child's spiritual development requires their partnering with and being involved at the school.
7. **Spiritual Formation** – Alumni report their Christian faith is stronger thanks to attending a Christian school, and they believe people can change with God's help.

Relationship Constructs

1. **Supportive Leadership** – Principals are trusted, teachers feel that leaders "have our backs," and leaders empower teachers and staff to make decisions.
2. **Leadership Interdependence** – Leaders, including board members, have diverse backgrounds and are transparent about and rely on others to offset their weaknesses.
3. **Family Relationships** – Teachers "get to know" families, and frequent and systemic communication facilitates positive relationships.
4. **Community Engagement** – The school engages with the surrounding community and local churches, and regularly taps into community resources, including networking and resource-sharing with other schools.
5. **Mentoring Students** – Staff point out talent in each student, help students see how they fit in God's bigger plan, and are aware of students' struggles at school or home.
6. **Insular Culture** – The school shields students from the world's brokenness, the school is independent from the surrounding community, and/or the student body lacks diversity.
7. **Christlike Teachers** – Teachers show Christlike love, kindness, and care to students. Parents feel students are cared about individually, including their spiritual development.
8. **Prosocial Orientation** – Students not only enjoy helping others, but also are known by others (e.g., peers) for showing love and care.
9. **Caring Environment** – Teachers are kind, students feel included in class, and students are protected from bullying.

Teaching & Learning Constructs

1. **Feedback** – Feedback on teaching practice and classroom management is given regularly to facilitate adjustments in real-time.
2. **Collaboration** – Learning from and with other teachers drives and inspires better teaching.
3. **Systems Thinking** – When planning for change, the potential impact on the school, the classroom, students, and the overall system are considered.
4. **Data-Driven Improvement** – Data is used to gauge school results and effectiveness, determine goal attainment, and address problems the school faces.
5. **Professional Development** – PD is provided on-site and is subject- and role-specific.
6. **Outcomes Focus** – Process does not matter if it isn't producing results, and change is distracting if it doesn't lead to increases in student achievement.
7. **Culture of Improvement** – Guided by school leadership and focused on the future, the school is continually improving/makes necessary changes to improve.
8. **Individualized Instruction** – Students are helped to figure out how they learn best and to identify their natural strengths.
9. **Best Practice** – Keeping up with best practices is prioritized and resources for doing so can be identified.
10. **Engaged Learning** – Students engage in activities that nurture critical thinking, evaluating information, and problem solving.
11. **Behaviors for Learning** (Previously Classroom Management) – The classroom is orderly and well-managed, and teachers are organized and consistent in supporting student behaviors that contribute to learning.

Expertise & Resources Constructs

1. **Qualified Staff** – New teacher hires are credentialed (educationally and licensed/certified) and have classroom experience.
2. **Responsiveness to Special Needs** – Teaching staff works together to serve students with special needs, aided by processes and resources for identifying and responding to those needs.
3. **Resources** – Materials and resources for teaching, including technology, are sufficient, and the school building is in good physical condition.
4. **Resource Planning** – A strategic financial plan and master facilities plan is in place, and financial planning is a strength of the board.
5. **Resource Constraints** – The school has financial resources to operate effectively; *or,* we could be more effective as a school if not for fiscal constraints, and we lack the resources we need to make changes in our school.

Well-Being Constructs

1. **Stress** – Constant feelings of stress and being overwhelmed accompany a lack of time to prepare for instruction (Teachers) or to focus on physical health (Leaders).
2. **Healthy Living** – Students are happy with their physical health, including sufficient exercise and a healthy diet.
3. **Resilience** – Students handle stress effectively and respond well to/bounce back from difficult situations.

FSCI Australia Pilot

In late 2020, seven Australian Christian schools, from diverse locations and states across the country, were recruited by Christian Schools Australia (CSA) to participate in an Australian pilot of the FSCI. Six of the schools utilized the traditional (non-automated) version of the instrument, while one of the schools trialed a new FSCI online platform. Qualitative follow-up surveys enabled Australian school leaders to provide feedback on the usefulness of FSCI insights in real-time. The qualitative data was positive and showed that leaders are already using FSCI results in their school improvement plans and overall strategic planning.

For each of the seven schools participating in the Australia pilot, the FSCI identified a set of five top *strength areas* and five major *areas for growth* (based on each school's individual construct scores). This information is valuable not only for the participating schools themselves but also for the Christian school sector, as it provides a snapshot of the key strengths and areas for improvement for a sample of schools in CSA membership.

Meaningful Strengths

Table 2 below shows the distribution of meaningful strengths of participating schools, with the description of each construct provided (note: only strengths that were identified in more than a quarter of schools in the sample are included).

Table 2. Distribution of Meaningful Strengths in FSCI Australia Pilot

Domain	Construct	Number of Schools	Percentage of Schools
Purpose	**Responsibility** – Leaders, teachers, and support staff feel a sense of shared ownership for school mission, success, and improvement.	7	100%
Purpose	**Holistic Teaching** – Teaching involves helping students develop spiritually and emotionally (teaching the heart and soul, as well as the mind).	7	100%
Expertise & Resources	**Qualified Staff** – New teacher hires are credentialed (educationally and licensed/certified) and have classroom experience.	5	71%
Relationships	**Supportive Leadership** – Principals are trusted, teachers feel that leaders "have our backs," and leaders empower teachers and staff to make decisions.	2	29%
Teaching & Learning	**Collaboration** – Learning from and with other teachers drives and inspires better teaching.	2	29%

Teaching & Learning	**Best Practice** – Keeping up with best practices is prioritized and resources for doing so can be identified.	2	29%
Teaching & Learning	**Behaviors for Learning** (Previously Classroom Management) – The classroom is orderly and well-managed, and teachers are organized and consistent in supporting student behaviors that contribute to learning.	2	29%
Expertise & Resources	**Responsiveness to Special Needs** – Teaching staff works together to serve students with special needs, aided by processes and resources for identifying and responding to those needs.	2	29%

These findings confirm that many of the distinctives claimed by the Christian school sector were reflected as strengths for participating schools. This includes cultivating a strong and shared sense of mission (*Responsibility)* which is operationalized through an education that develops the whole student, academically and spiritually (*Holistic Teaching)*. Both of these areas of strength are shared with the overall sample of FSCI-participating schools in North America and internationally.

The findings also suggest that *Qualified Staff* is a strength for a good number of schools. This was a unique strength of schools in the Australia pilot and was not seen at this frequency in the larger sample, which suggests that hiring requirements and practices are more rigorous in Australian states (and possibly more regulated from a governmental standpoint). While the remaining areas of strength found among schools in the pilot were not held in common by more than two of the seven schools, it is interesting to note that three out of the four areas (*Collaboration, Best Practice*, and *Behaviors for Learning*) all fall within the *Teaching & Learning* domain. Similarly, *Responsiveness to Special Needs*, though in the domain of *Expertise & Resources,* is closely related to this domain. This suggests that instructional culture in the pilot schools is strong, likely related to and/or reflective of the strength area of qualified staff.

Interestingly, *Integrated Worldview* and *God's Story*—two *Purpose* constructs which appear at high frequencies among the North American and international sample of FSCI participating schools—did not appear as areas of particular strength in the Australia pilot. When contrasted with the above findings, this may suggest that while the quality of staffing and instruction in the pilot schools is high, there may be room for growth related to biblical worldview integration in instruction. This of course must take into consideration the challenges posed by national requirements for uniform curricula and standardized testing (which was likely minimal to non-existent for many Christian schools in the FSCI North American and international sample), thereby raising the question of how Christian schools can effectuate their unique missions within different governmental contexts.

Opportunities for Growth

Table 3 below shows the distribution of opportunities for growth for participating schools, with the description of each construct provided (note: only opportunities for growth that were identified in more than a quarter of schools in the sample are included).

Table 3. Distribution of Opportunities for Growth in FSCI Australia Pilot

Domain	Construct	Number of Schools	Percentage of Schools
Well-Being	**Stress** – Constant feelings of stress and being overwhelmed accompany a lack of time to prepare for instruction (Teachers) or to focus on physical health (Leaders).	7	100%
Purpose	**Questioning** – Students have doubts about their faith, lack time to pray or study the Bible, and feel that most Christians are too judgmental.	5	71%
Teaching & Learning	**Outcomes Focus** – Process does not matter if it isn't producing results, and change is distracting if it doesn't lead to increases in student achievement.	5	71%
Relationships	**Insular Culture** – The school shields students from the world's brokenness, the school is independent from the surrounding community, and/or the student body lacks diversity.	4	57%
Teaching & Learning	**Feedback** – Feedback on teaching practice and classroom management is given regularly to facilitate adjustments in real-time.	4	57%
Well-Being	**Resilience** – Students handle stress effectively and respond well to/bounce back from difficult situations.	4	57%

Not surprisingly, given the disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021, *Stress* for both teachers and leaders was the construct most frequently appearing as an area for growth (for 100% of schools in the Australia pilot). It should be noted, however, that even in the 2018-2019 international sample of participating schools—which predated the pandemic—the construct of *Stress* appeared as one of the top areas for improvement. This suggests the importance of well-being for educators as not only a short-term, but also a long-term, concern. Not unrelated to this finding is the appearance of *Resilience* as a growth opportunity for the majority of schools in the Australian sample; this student construct suggests that improving and enhancing well-being is an important area of focus for *all* school constituents.

Questioning also appeared as a growth opportunity for over two-thirds of schools in the sample. It should be noted that this construct also appeared with high frequency in the international sample (which featured diverse admissions policies and school types), suggesting that rather than something problematic to be "solved," this can be viewed an opportunity to meaningfully engage students in mentorship, discussion, and other life-on-life discipleship efforts as part of Christian schools' mission and vision for faith formation and discipleship.

Appearing at the same frequency, the construct of *Outcomes Focus* points to the need for schools to focus more intentionally on outcomes (including student achievement) and results, rather than process and activity. This suggests that while leaders and educators may be occupied with a plethora of seemingly worthwhile programs and initiatives, schools would benefit from evaluating the impact of their efforts—and then reinforcing, focusing on, or otherwise prioritizing those which are most effective.

For over half of pilot schools, the construct of *Feedback* appeared as a growth area; notably, providing regular feedback on classroom practices is not always the same thing as formal supervision and evaluation processes, but rather tends to involve peer engagement and observation by other teachers (Reeves 2008). Over half of schools also were perceived by constituents as isolated from the community in one or more ways, lacking diversity in their student body, and/or overprotecting students (*Insular Culture*).

Overall, there was significant congruence between growth areas for schools in the Australia pilot and schools from other parts of the world, with one notable exception: outside of Australia, constructs related to resources (in particular, *Resource Constraints*) featured prominently as an area for improvement. This may be due to the market challenges that schools in North America in particular have faced for well over a decade (Barna and ACSI 2017) as well as differential funding schemes for education.

Toward Sector-Level Insights

While individual schools will benefit most directly from administering the FSCI in their own contexts, this "snapshot" of a sample of Australian Christian schools provides insight for those concerned with leadership across the Christian school sector. For example, the top three current areas for growth identified by the FSCI across schools (*Teacher/Leader Stress, Questioning,* and *Outcomes Focus*) can inform Christian school leadership development efforts—whether in formal or informal, networked or individual, and organizational or academic contexts. Moreover, as the number of schools participating in the FSCI continues to grow in Australia and internationally, ongoing analysis will enable year-over-year tracking of shifts in these areas of strength and growth opportunities for Christian schools, thereby generating trend-level insights regarding school strengths and improvement needs in the sector. Finally, broadening international participation in the FSCI can lead to opportunities for international collaboration and shared learning related to flourishing school practices and cultures.

The FSCI and School-Level Change

In the Fall 2020 edition of ACSI's *Research in Brief,* Albert Cheng, Cardus Senior Fellow and faculty at the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, writes:

> As education continues to evolve in the data-driven age, educators will need to continue pioneering the way forward. What faith-informed practices will be needed to navigate teaching and learning as the salience of and dependence on data waxes? How should educators engage with emerging tools such as the school-level data reports that the FCSI will generate? (13)

This final section of this report addresses these questions, beginning with a discussion of how schools can best understand FSCI results, build on FSCI strength areas, and plan for improvement based on FSCI insights. The report concludes by considering the implications of flourishing for the change and improvement process in Christian schools.

Understanding FSCI Results

While the FSCI identifies constructs that are key to flourishing, it is not proscriptive. Rather, it enables schools to see themselves on a multi-layered journey—in which they may be flourishing with excellence in some respects, but need to grow and improve in others—versus passing a goalpost or marker which indicates they've "arrived" at flourishing. The FSCI school-level report provides recommendations for using insights in this journey, as follows.

1. *Going deeper.* Schools should consider whether any quantifiable outcomes they track can be tied to the strengths and growth opportunities identified by the FSCI. Leaders may also seek to capture more in-depth data for a targeted area through supplemental quantitative study (e.g., through use of a validated instrument specific to a domain or construct). Conducting qualitative interviews or focus groups with school constituents around these areas are also important for yielding additional nuance to the quantitative findings of both the FSCI and additional studies. These approaches will provide leaders not only with greater understanding of how these are areas of strength and for growth for the school, but also with community-building opportunities to engage diverse school audiences in reflecting together on their school's culture.

2. *Tracking growth.* While snapshots of a school's culture at a given point in time are useful for needs assessment and planning, longitudinal data is ideal for tracking change and growth. The FSCI provides benchmark data for each construct, so schools can track any changes over time as measured by repeat assessment with the FSCI. In order to understand shifts in future years' results, schools will need to keep track of changes, programs, and initiatives, as well as determine a cycle of FSCI administration (as well as that of other surveys and/or qualitative measures) that allows for longitudinal comparison.

Building on Strengths

The FSCI provides school leaders with insights related to areas of strength *and* for growth. This is important to highlight because when receiving feedback or insights on their school's culture, the

instinct of many leaders will be to focus on areas for improvement. While understandable, this often sidesteps important cultural gains to be had from also taking a strengths-based approach, as follows.

1. *Communicating strengths—internally and externally.* Data from the FSCI on school strengths can be used as part of internal and external communication efforts—both of which play important roles in shaping school culture—whether through school correspondence, on social media, or at school gatherings. Internally, leaders can provide positive feedback to school constituents who contribute directly or indirectly to key areas of strength for the school; qualitative feedback from FSCI-participating schools indicated this encourages teachers and staff, in particular, to reframe daily challenges with students in light of important outcomes (like spiritual formation impacts reported by alumni). School families will also want to know what makes their children's school unique in light of the research-based findings provided by the FSCI; prospective families can likewise benefit from these insights as they gauge the "fit" of the school for their children.

2. *Capitalizing on strengths to build momentum.* Schools can engage relevant internal stakeholders (board, leaders, staff) in discussions around how areas of strength can be reinforced and built out further. Understanding how a school has developed a particular area of strength can also help the school to leverage those strengths for improving other areas. For example, if a school's area of strength lies in the construct of *Collaboration* (learning from and with other teachers drives and inspires better teaching), faculty teams can be leveraged to address other areas which present opportunities for growth (e.g., through focused effort by professional learning communities, collaborative action research, and so forth). This can create a "snowball" or "cascade" effect, whereby the momentum for change is generated by engaging the core strengths of the school.

Planning for Improvement

While the work of school leadership is challenging regardless of setting, based on their research with Christian school leaders, Banke, Maldonado, and Lacey (2012) observe:

> Today's school administrators are expected to lead and manage schools. They balance the budget, attend to students' personal and academic needs, evaluate personnel and curriculum planning, and all the while attempt to inspire the community and accomplish the objectives, mission and vision of the school… Christian school leaders are responsible for all these same tasks and responsibilities as other school administrators but are also responsible for the spiritual development of the school. (238-239)

Amidst the pressures posed by these "routine" tasks, leaders must also manage the change process as they engage their schools in various improvement efforts. Key to this process is identifying areas of focus that, if prioritized in improvement efforts, are likely to have the biggest impact on flourishing outcomes.

To this end, qualitative feedback from leaders (both in the Australia pilot and across the world) indicated that FSCI insights have helped them in gauging school priorities—specifically, by helping leaders to telescope out to the level of culture, to identify what "matters" the most for improvement,

and to make mission-aligned change. For example, one school leader reported that the FSCI enabled the school to zero in on "accomplishing the things that matter the most." Another cited the FSCI as key in examining "our own school culture" and the "strengths and weaknesses" in that culture. And a third indicated that the FSCI insights enhanced the school's ability to "implement change… for delivering our mission to school families with the highest excellence." Specific ways in which FSCI results are being used by school leaders fall into two categories, as follows.

1. *Using insights in existing efforts.* The growth opportunities identified by the FSCI can help inform ongoing efforts to shape and strengthen school culture. Participating schools have reported using FSCI insights in ongoing strategic planning, school improvement planning, and accreditation efforts. For many schools, FSCI insights have helped to spark dialogue and collaboration across multiple school audiences around ways that insights can be incorporated into existing improvement efforts. For others, FSCI findings have provided needed external validation of change efforts already underway at the school.

2. *Developing new/targeted efforts.* Schools have also reported developing new programs or initiatives to address key growth opportunities identified by the FSCI; for example, school leaders reported that findings in the *Well-Being* domain "alerted" them to the need for planning and programming around stress reduction for teachers. The FSCI school level report recommends that school leaders research best practices in areas for growth, as well as visit other schools with demonstrated success in those areas.

Finally, the FSCI's inclusion of multiple audiences—such as support staff, who are often overlooked in school-based professional development—also pointed to the need to include input from different school constituents in both new and existing efforts.

Implications for School Change

When it comes to understanding and utilizing FSCI results, many of the approaches shared thus far are in keeping with best practice for translating research into educational practice. The question remains, however, how these practices can be "faith-informed" within the context of Christian schooling. In other words, how is the journey to "flourishing" in Christian schools different from the school improvement process in which other types of schools might engage?

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, flourishing involves a more expansive view of the goals of education and is more commensurate to the broader, holistic set of expected student outcomes in Christian schools. In addition to different ends, Christian schools also differ in their "means" to achieve those ends. Certainly, Christian schools engage in goal setting, long-range planning, using data to drive improvement, and gathering input from school constituents, which are the primary tools in the school improvement "toolbox." However, Christian schools take a fundamentally different view of change than the managerial and technical approaches that predominate in school improvement. Because Christian schools are first and foremost *incarnational communities of faith*, they prioritize *relational-* and *community*-based approaches to change.

Christian schools view school constituents not as people who simply execute a mission, or from whom "buy-in" must be obtained, but as equally beloved children of God for whom Christ died. Every member of the school community—leaders, teachers, families, students, board members, staff—brings to the school community various gifts and callings without which the school would be incomplete (1 Corinthians 12: 12-27). Similarly, change in the Christian school cannot be viewed as "improvement for improvement's sake." Rather, Christian schools commit to growth and improvement in order that all members of the school community might flourish—both students and educators—as Scripture encourages: "May the LORD cause you to flourish, both you and your children. May you be blessed by the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 115:14).

And finally, Christian schools have Jesus as their model, who did "everything well" and brought hope and healing to all who were in need (Mark 7:37). Flourishing schools do not better themselves *for* themselves, but rather so they can minister Christ's love (Ephesians 5:2) and light (Matthew 5:14-16) more fully to the larger communities in which they are situated. For this reason, school leaders seek to grow in Christlikeness in all the domains of flourishing—in their expression of and living out their purpose, in the quality of their relationships, in how they support teaching and learning, in their stewardship of expertise and resources, and in their care for the well-being of themselves and others—and to lead their schools and colleagues in the same abundant, life-giving journey toward flourishing (John 10:10b).

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For More Information

For more information about the FSCI, as well as to download the publicly available reports *Flourishing Schools: Research on Christian School Culture and Community* and *Leadership for Flourishing Schools: From Research to Practice*, visit https://www.acsi.org/thought-leadership. Specific questions regarding the FSCI can be directed to research@acsi.org.