

Anna Baker:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host Anna Baker, Senior Marketing Manager here at Vanderbloemen. On today's episode, Brian Jensen, one of our Executive Search Consultants talks with Larry Taylor, president of the Association of Christian Schools International or ACSI. ACSI is the largest Christian school association in the world with over 20,000 schools and 6 million students. In this conversation, Larry shares how Christian education has been overcoming the obstacles of COVID-19 and how they're becoming more intentional and strategic in their kingdom efforts. He dove into the ways that ACSI is maturing in their efforts to provide widespread access to Christian education while ensuring a commitment for kingdom curriculum. Larry also shares tips for Christian educators as they continue to advance the gospel through Christian education. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag #Vandercast and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group, where we post behind the scenes content. Here's Brian's conversation with Larry Taylor.

Brian Jensen:

Well, greetings everybody. I am so excited for today's episode, talking with my friend Larry Taylor, who is the president of ACSI. We're going to talk about what he does and the organization that is I think fascinating. And they've been fun to work with over the past year plus. We've created some really good friends at ACSI and just happy to spend some time with Larry. So Larry, I'm going to let you introduce yourself, but basically I want to ask you to tell us a little bit about your story, you've had an interesting story, especially over the last couple of years. So tell us a little bit of your story and then more about your current work that you've moved into.

Larry Taylor:

Yeah. Well, thank you Brian. Thank you for what you said about making some friends with the ACSI. We certainly fill the same way and appreciate what you've done to help us become a stronger association. My story has been a little bit interesting the last couple of years. So I transitioned to the ACSI president in about a year ago, or a year and a half ago. And before that I was 20 years head of school at Prestonwood, [inaudible 00:02:20] Christian Academy, which is in Dallas. We have a school system, a pre-K through 12th grade in the Plano area. And launched a satellite campus, it's up to 10th grade now, about 20 miles North. And we have an online Academy, we just launched an inner city school in South Dallas, the King's Academy. And we have a special needs school St Timothy Christian Academy .

Larry Taylor:

And so we just are blessed, the 20 years that I spent here, just kind of been a better 20 years, just incredible board of trustees and church that believe in kingdom education and think out of the box. And our goal at Prestonwood was always, how can we increase access to kingdom education, to as many people as possible?

Larry Taylor:

And before that, I grew up in Orlando, Florida and spent 12 years at a Christian school called The First Academy and did a lot of things there for 12 years. I was the athletic director and principal, and last couple of years I was the assistant head of school there. But that's where I grew up, that's our home, it's where I met my wife Delinda. Before that was, I spent a couple of years in the public school teaching and coaching.

Larry Taylor:

But the new pivot has been to transition to the Association of Christian Schools International. And I'm so honored and blessed to enter that position, very humbled to be leading that association. We're excited about what God's doing with ACSI right now.

Brian Jensen:

Yeah. And I want to talk a little bit about that, but before we do, I'm going to put you on the spot. I'm going to ask something I didn't tell you, I was going to ask, but as you've been in Christian education for a long time, we're going to talk later about what it looks like moving forward. But as you reflect on the past couple of decades, what do you think has changed the most in Christian education?

Larry Taylor:

That's a great question. I think it's important for context to say that I didn't grow up in a Christian school. I didn't even really know they existed when I was growing up in Orlando. And really what happened about 35 years ago when I started transitioning into Christian education really had its roots and my negative experience with Christian schools, if I could just begin there because it has a lot to do with what, I think answers your question about what has happened in the last 10, 15, 20 years.

Larry Taylor:

But I think my perception of Christian schools when I started, when I felt God calling me into teaching and coaching, I was in the public school. We competed a lot against Christian schools in Orlando scholastically, athletically in the arts. And my limited exposure to Christian schools at that time was pretty negative, I just felt like the one word definition was mediocrity. There was just a sense of mediocrity in the Christian schools that I was exposed to, little did I know that all around the country and the world, there were some incredible, amazing Christian schools.

Larry Taylor:

But I think what's happened over the last 10, 15, 20 years with Christian schools in a real good way is a lot of the Christian schools, and especially in the United States have matured. And I don't mean that in a condescending way, they really have matured. The Christian school movement, I think became stronger and stronger and stronger, the vision of pastors or trustees, school leaders, parents. So I've noticed since my time of just beginning in Christian education is a real strong commitment to kingdom education, a strong commitment to excellence, not the world's definition of excellence, but God's definition of excellence.

Larry Taylor:

And so paralleling that maturation where schools have become stronger and more grounded, I think we all would agree that America and I'm focusing on our schools here in the United States, has become more and more secular. And the challenges of that culture, the culture that we are growing up in. So we have this parallel dynamic of Christian schools are becoming more intentional, more strategic while in a culture that's becoming more and more secular.

Larry Taylor:

And so those things collide, what we're seeing now, the parents, and this is supported by Barna Research and some other highly respected research groups. But what we're seeing now 10, 15, 20, even 30 years later is kind of the result of the culture. When I say culture, we're talking about the church or

the Christian culture, the secular influence. And so the parents who are coming to Christian schools, it's a little bit more polarized. They're either really strong in their faith or they're not at all. And so that changes the family dynamics of schools who are enrolling this type of parent. It has changed, and not in a bad way, but just in a way where Christian schools have had to recognize that not everybody who is coming is as biblically literate or biblical worldview literate as they were maybe 20, 30, 40 years ago. And I just look at that as an opportunity.

Brian Jensen:

Yeah. Yeah. Fascinating. Thank you for sharing that. So I want to give you a chance to talk about ACSI before we jump into some other questions I have. So ACSI is just this really incredible network of Christian schools, literally from around the globe. I'd love to just give you a chance to tell us more about the organization and what makes it so special.

Larry Taylor:

Thank you. It really is special. It's a special organization. It's the largest Christian school association in the world. And I say that very humbly because being large doesn't make you any better than anyone else or having a higher number of schools part of your association doesn't make it any better or any worse. But it's exciting because in America, we have right at 2,500 schools spread out in the United States, but we have another 20,000 schools that are around the globe. And really there's more than that, that are affiliated with ACSI. But we directly minister to about 20 to 25,000 schools, right at 6 million students around the globe.

Larry Taylor:

And Brian, I just got to tell you, I've been all over the world the last two years. And I've been in countries in Africa where the schools are just starting. And I've been in Australia where the Christian schools have been 20, 30 years old. I mean, we've seen all the above and what's exciting is that kingdom education, no matter what context, what country, even in Cuba, the last 17 years I go to Cuba a couple of times a year, regardless of the political dynamic, regardless of the resources, what we have found and no pun intended here, but you can't quarantine kingdom education. Everybody wants their child to be educated regardless of the country, regardless of even their back background and their faith.

Larry Taylor:

And what we're seeing just explode around the country, around the world and that ACSI is really privileged to be a part of, is this interest, and even people come from different faiths, not the Judea-Christian or just the Christian faith, because they want their babies to learn, they want their babies to be educated. So ACSI has an opportunity through this network, this global network and the resources to really speak into whether it's India or Europe or China, some really unique areas where schooling has to be delivered differently, sometimes because of the context.

Larry Taylor:

In summary real quick, probably the most exciting thing that's [inaudible 00:13:24] ACSI right now is we just concluded a very, very extensive strategic planning process. I felt like the reshaping, it's really beyond the strategic plan. It's a reshaping, that's focused on three pillars, advancing, access and advocacy. And advancing, access and advocacy have their own definition, I'll share those if you want me to, but what it's doing is it's helping us as an organization say, "Christian education and the world has changed a little bit. What do we have to do to reshape to better serve our schools?" And those are the

three primary pillars that we're going to be building our services around. And just really excited, we're going to be more nimble. We're reshaping just our areas of focus, reallocating and redeploying personnel into those three pillars. And so I'm excited about this pivot that we're making in the ACSI.

Brian Jensen:

And there's so many exciting things to talk about here. And so let me jump to one of our other questions right now, because you've just described, finishing the strategic planning process with these three new pillars. Tell us briefly about each of those, and then how you see this really furthering the mission of Christian education?

Larry Taylor:

Yeah, absolutely. So the advancing pillar has a primary focus on what it says, advancing and strengthening the Christian schools. One component though, is in thought leadership. So ACSI, we're investing resources into research, or we're launching a strategic incubator. I like to call it horizon scanning, where we will be looking into the future, the paradigm shift that's taking place in education, all education, how it's delivered. We've just seen in the last year or so, just the rapid acceleration of how education is delivered differently. And so that advancing pillar is all about how do we stay five to 10 years ahead of some of this paradigm shift so that we can align and better serve our schools to remain in that sustainability mode through these changes.

Larry Taylor:

The access pillar is a huge, we want to increase access to kingdom education. And that is going to range from primarily two initiatives. One will be our never ending attempt to influence school choice, parent choice, to provide access for parents to have the choice to take their child, utilize through whatever state school choice program they have, tax credit, vouchers, whatever. So we really want to lean into that, continuing to lean into that.

Larry Taylor:

But also we have a program called the ACE program. ACE program led by Dr. Vernard Gant really deals with children that have been disenfranchised. They've been disenfranchised academically or culturally or economically. So you're talking about children that are coming from typically low income, high poverty areas. I like how Dr. Gant says that "If Jesus came back today and visited our school or our schools, would he see the students that he would invite into that school?" And so we really see this access, ACSI taking a lead role in really increasing access to those groups of families that today do not have access to kingdom education.

Larry Taylor:

In the area of advocacy, two primary functions. One, to tell the story of Christian schools, to advocate the great stories. A lot of people, even a lot of Christians I hear it often that the Christian schools, they're pulling away from the community or the common good. And that couldn't be further from the truth as anything. So we want to tell that story better, we want to tell the great stories of how our alumni and even current students are entering the world with not just their faith intact, but with a love and a desire to serve.

Larry Taylor:

But we also, the other part of advocacy is to protect the space, the religious liberties. And so we've actually already started redeploying and reallocating resources to Washington DC. We have an office in Washington, DC. We have a legal legislative team. The last three Supreme Court rulings, two of the three, the ACSI was very involved, even on one of them, it was cited by one of the Supreme Court justices as a very influential in that decision. So we want to be advocates for the religious liberties and the protection of our Christian schools. So those are the three pillars advancing, access and advocacy.

Brian Jensen:

And I love those. And you as an organization have well incredible leaders, I've gotten to know a number of them, and you have a love and a passion for Christian education and a mission to serve it well and further it. When you take a look at all of this stuff right now, how do you describe the landscape of Christian education? Because you're probably going to hear extremes on both sides, right? It's never been better and it's going to close its doors. And neither of those I think are completely true. So where do you characterize the current landscape of Christian educator?

Larry Taylor:

That's another great question. I think the landscape changes a little bit from region to region. I think, I would say we're at a pivotal point Christian schools, because philosophically Christian schools are being embraced, but then you have to build a business model around that. You know what I mean? Education is not cheap. And so I think the landscape right now, and I'm real excited about this. I think there's more and more individuals, there's more and more denominations, more churches that are actually saying, "If we can come together and collaborate. And if our end goal is not just school, but if our end goal is training the next generation, then that's a common goal." So churches want to train the next generation, Christian schools want to train and parachurch ministries. So what we're starting to see is a desire of all of these ministries doing more collaboration, so that the provision of Christian schools, or let me step back, the training that can take place and a Christian school can become more of a reality.

Larry Taylor:

So I think the landscape, all of education is changing right now, universities, public, private, Christian, and some of it's financially driven, some of it is philosophically driven or whatever, how it's delivered. And I think the Christian school landscape is going to have to make intentional strategic pivots to be a part of that diversity of delivery systems or else they're going to get left behind. But I'm seeing that being embraced by our Christian schools.

Brian Jensen:

Yeah. And I would think it's got to be, you said intentional strategic pivots and pivots being plural. Right? It's not, "Well, we pivoted and we're just going to stay now." It could be pivot after pivot, after pivot to stay, not just crassly ahead of the curve, but to be continually improving, continually building access, continually finding ways to further Christ's kingdom, really through education.

Larry Taylor:

Yeah. Right. That's right. In fact we just launched a research project based on what you just said by our Chief Strategy Innovation Officer, Dr. Lynn Swaner, and this was a grant funded research project on sustainability. And actually, it's a two year project where we're going to be studying in about eight or nine different delivery systems. So what I mean by that is everyone understands the traditional school, you go to school, from eight to three o'clock, and it's a traditional school, we're actually studying eight

to nine other delivery systems that have the same end goal, it's just delivered differently. Whether that's online or whether that's a hybrid. And so Christian schools, if we want to sustain... Our goal is actually not to sustain the school as much as sustain the school's mission. And that mission, how it's delivered could be totally different, but with the same goals. And I think that's going to be the biggest pivot. And you're right, it is plural, it's got to be pivots.

Brian Jensen:

And it's not just survivability, but flourishing, is what we want to see.

Larry Taylor:

Love it, love it. Yeah. In fact, we just concluded a research project actually a couple years ago, using that word flourishing, we have an instrument now that actually measures the flourishing components of Christian schools. And so that's the goal, it's not just to provide. It's the flourish.

Brian Jensen:

Yeah. Yeah. So I want to ask you, I mentioned you work with some incredible leaders and you took the helm at ACSI in a pretty interesting time, or on the threshold of a very interesting year. You and I are sitting here talking in the fall of 2020, which an interesting year is probably an understatement. So what's this been like for you? And if I could put you on the spot, what have you learned, if anything, new about leadership, as you've moved into this roll?

Larry Taylor:

I think 2020, well, I hope we look back and say, "We'll never experience another year like 2020." I got to tell you, it has been for a new president, at first when the pandemic hit and just other factors, the racial unrest, temporarily I thought, "Wow, we're right in the middle of strategic planning and we're trying to pivot, but we couldn't ignore what was happening in the country and really around the world. And God just really started moving the silver lining, like for me personally, as a new president, the silver lining for me was able to observe our personnel in the midst of a crisis and watch the... I knew we had a strong team, now I have observed the strong team and the nimble approach to change and to change overnight, like a lot of businesses had to do. That's been one of the silver linings.

Larry Taylor:

We have an incredible staff around the world, but I've been able to have been able to observe that as new president, we never would have learned what we've learned in 2020 that I think is really going to speak into our strategic plan in the future, had we not gone through these tough times. We've gone from theory to reality and in a lot of different areas.

Larry Taylor:

So yeah, it's been crazy, but it's also given us an opportunity to serve. Our goal, my personal goal is to connect with school leaders. Our school leaders are absolutely an amazing, incredible, they work hard and my heart and ACSI's heart is to serve those school leaders and to be a fuel to their gas tanks, so to speak. They're the ones on the front line, they're the boots on the ground. And through this kind of crazy year, I felt like we'd been able to lead into that and to really help hold their arms up as they lead their parents and students and faculty.

Brian Jensen:

Yeah. Well, this is a great little segue because I'm going to end with this. I'm going to let you encourage those school leaders who might be listening. And I want to do it this way, I'm stealing this question from the, I did a podcast with Lynn Swaner, sorry, she got on my list first before you did. She was wonderful and it was an amazing interview. But I use the same question cause I loved her thoughts. And I want to ask you the same thing, navigating Christian education right now, in its current malaise is just, we know not for the faint of heart. And I think personally moving forward more often than not, we're really going to have to heat the words that we see in 1st Chronicles, when we read about the sons of Issachar, that the sons of Issachar, they understood the times and they knew how to respond. And so I think that's going to be really important, but I'd love for you to maybe reflect on that. And then how are you encouraging school leaders during this time of Christian education, the landscape we've talked about and what do you think will be key for them to keep in mind moving forward?

Larry Taylor:

Well, it doesn't surprise me that Lynn Swaner got ahead of me. First of all Lynn, she's doing an incredible job.

Brian Jensen:

She is.

Larry Taylor:

And I'll even go back to my coaching days, I think it's important regardless of the context that we find ourselves in, the culture and the changes and everything is that we keep our eye on our transcendent calls. And our transcendent calls is to produce obedient followers of Jesus Christ and the... I follow four or five major research outlets that help me really do what you said about the tribes of Issachar. Right? I think my job and I think ACSI's job, and I think heads of school and trustees, our job is to understand the times, and then to develop a training strategy to not just produce a generation of students who can survive, but a generation of Daniels, a generation of Esters who entered...

Larry Taylor:

I look at Daniel and I think we, like Daniel when he entered the Babylonian culture, he was an exile. And I look at the students in the United States, and this is not a cynical comment, we are in a post-Christian America. And so if we neglect to understand those times, then how we train our students will set them up for failure. And so we need to embrace that, it's an opportunity. It needs to speak into how we educate, how we mentor, how we prepare that generation of Daniels.

Larry Taylor:

I believe without a doubt that our God is bigger than anything that's happening in culture. And I believe that our God, through the power of God, I don't think the power is through the education. I think it's the power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, developing Christian thinkers to enter every sector of society, law, medicine, corporate world, teaching, ministry, confident in their identity in Christ, being able to enter it with confidence in the midst of a very pluralistic society.

Larry Taylor:

And so I think the Christian schools that are going to be in trouble are the ones that don't understand the times, or they're fearful. They understand the times, but they're fearful to address them. I don't know a ministry that has students for eight to 12 hours a day. And if we can't do it in our Christian schools, then I don't know another ministry that can. So I think we have a wonderful opportunity and I'm excited about the future of Christian education.

Brian Jensen:

Well, good. I love that we can end on such an encouraging note as we know that it's difficult, it's hard work, but it's really good work. And we don't rely on our own power, but on the power of God and his spirit working in us and through us, and just so encouraged to hear about the things that ACSI is doing. It's always good to talk with you and be encouraged by your wisdom. So thank you for your time.

Larry Taylor:

Brian, thank you. Can I say one more thing?

Brian Jensen:

Absolutely.

Larry Taylor:

I want to say this because it is part of our strategic plan. I've talked a lot about Christian schools, but one of the things that we feel God's calling us to, is to look at all Christian educators, even if they're teaching in the public school, even if they're homeschooling. And so I'm really excited about what we are thinking about as we prepare the future of training our Daniels and our Esters. Had it not been for a Christian football coach and my public school when I was a bonehead at junior high school, I wouldn't be here today. I mean, that was so... We're thinking beyond just Christian schools to Christian educators, and that's exciting.

Brian Jensen:

Yeah. That is really exciting. Such an incredible vision. Very glad that you shared that. Larry, thank you so much for your time and looking forward to see what you and ACSI does moving into the future.

Larry Taylor:

Thank you Brian, it's an honor to be with you guys. And keep up the great work, you guys are helping us get stronger. So thank you.

Brian Jensen:

Very welcome. Thank you.

Anna Baker:

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