

southern connect



What Does a **Healthy** School Look Like?

The mission of the Southern California Conference (SCC) is to exalt Christ by cultivating healthy churches and schools. In order to do this successfully for our schools, we need to know what a healthy school looks like.

The Office of Education, along with our schools' principals, engaged in research and brainstorming to develop some ideas, which were reviewed by both the S C C



Wayne Dunbar
Vice President
for Education

Board of Education and Executive Committee, before a final revision by the Office of Education and principals.

A school cannot grow with confidence or lead with clarity unless everyone shares the same understanding of what it means to be healthy.

Defining what a healthy Adventist school looks like isn't just a theoretical idea—it's an important act of stewardship. When a school can be clear about what health means, it gains direction, strengthens leadership, and brings its community together around a shared common purpose. Most importantly,

it helps ensure the school can faithfully serve students not just today, but for generations to come.

A school cannot grow with confidence or lead with clarity unless everyone shares the same understanding of what it means to be healthy. Clearly defining these characteristics creates a common vision—one that connects faith, learning, leadership, governance, and school culture. It helps everyone pull in the same direction.

Once these characteristics are clearly defined and embraced, they act like a compass. They help the school stay rooted in Christ and on course, while continuing to grow with wisdom, excellence, and integrity. Without this clarity, schools can easily become reactive—responding to immediate pressures instead of intentionally pursuing their mission.

Having these agreed-upon markers of health also changes how success is measured. Instead of focusing only

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Southern California Conference
of Seventh-day Adventists

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southern connect **Editor** Lauren Lacson | **Submit a story** Email us at: communication@sccsda.org

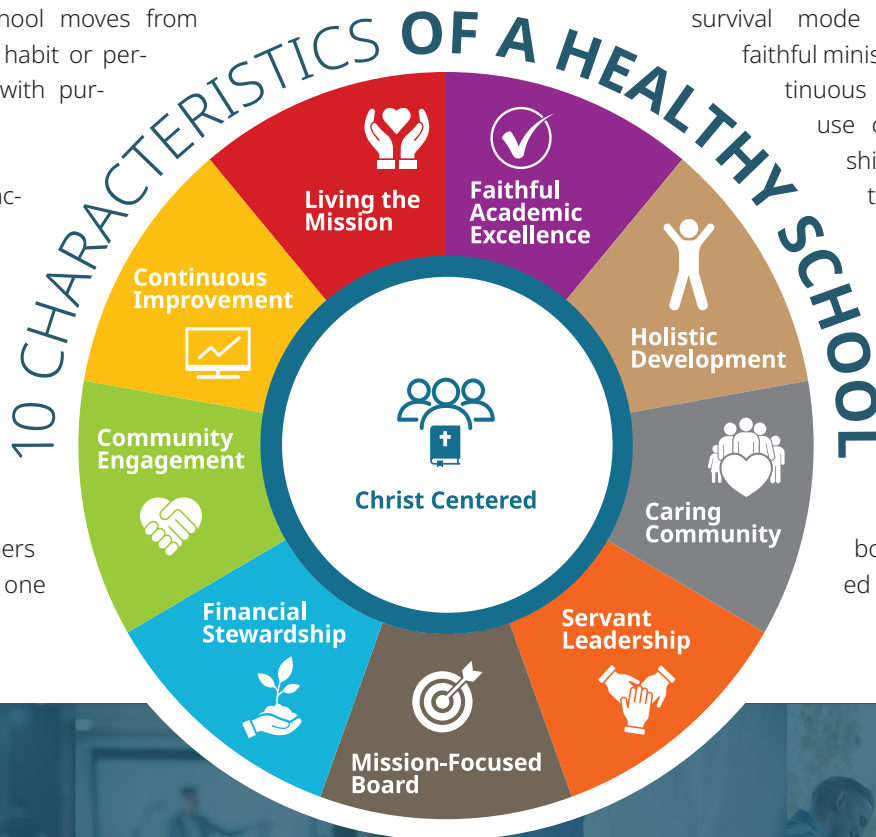
on enrollment numbers, finances, or test scores, the school begins to value faithfulness to mission, student growth, strong relationships, and organizational integrity. The school moves from operating based on habit or personality to leading with purpose and unity.

These shared characteristics also become practical tools. They guide decision-making in areas like planning, budgeting, staffing, and program development. Leaders and board members can consistently ask one

important question: Does this move us toward the kind of healthy school we've defined? This shared focus builds trust,

clarifies roles, and reduces confusion.

Over time, clearly defined characteristics will help a school move beyond survival mode toward sustainable, faithful ministry. They support continuous improvement, wise use of resources, leadership development, and thoughtful planning for the future. When a school truly lives out these values, it becomes a powerful witness—showing its community that Adventist education can be both spiritually grounded and skillfully led. •

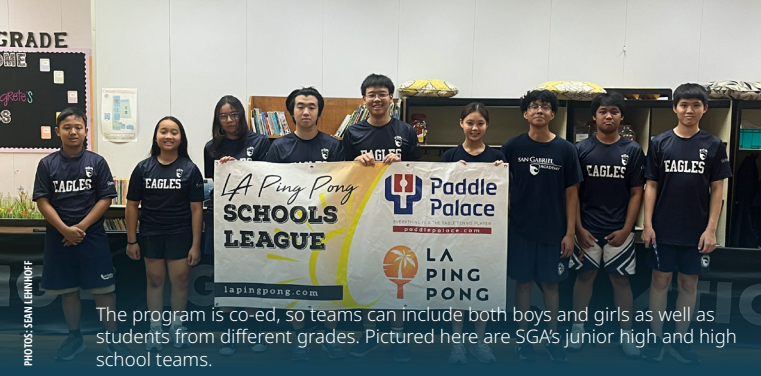


EQUIP 26

LEAD | SERVE | ENGAGE

A conference-wide training event

3 P.M. **MAY 16, 2026** VALLEJO DRIVE CHURCH



SGA's high school team plays in the L.A. league championship game for the fall 2024 season, which they won.

Table Tennis Serves Up Fun at SGA

BY LAUREN LACSON

High school sports often bring to mind basketball, soccer, or volleyball. But 10 years ago, when then-principal Angel Nair encouraged San Gabriel Academy Elementary teachers to bring extracurricular, elective options that would be creative and different, a new option came up.

Junior high teacher Sean Lehnhoff, who teaches grades 5-8, immediately thought of table tennis. "I've loved racquet sports through college, high school, and beyond," Lehnhoff shared. "It was something that I thought would be really easy and accessible for us to do."

What makes table tennis unique is its low cost and easy logistics, so it didn't take much to get the idea off the ground. "Pretty early on, we bought some really cheap tables and just started teaching the kids in an elective sense," Lehnhoff said.

Soon, Lehnhoff was talking with other local schools who were interested in what was happening at SGA, and they began brainstorming. "We built this league called L.A. Ping Pong," he recalled. "It's something that technically existed as a general league for collegiate, older [players]. It was inactive for a few years when I proposed this, but it's shifted now into what is primarily an interscholastic league targeting grades five or six through 12."

The league officially launched in the fall of 2019, but the pandemic that would soon come delayed them for about a year until they were able to restart in the spring of 2021. "From there, it slowly started to grow, and more and more schools got involved," Lehnhoff recalled.

The league welcomes all schools in the area, but Lehnhoff carries a specific burden for other Adventist schools: "My thought was, 'We have a lot of small schools that don't have any sports, and so why not offer them this opportunity?'" A

handful of other Southern California Conference schools have since become involved.

With teams of only three to six students, it's especially accessible for small schools, and two seasons, fall (September-December) and spring (March-May), work with different school schedules that happen to offer other sports, too.

Student participation also goes beyond L.A.: The SGA team has gone on to the national tournament for the past two years after winning championships in the local league.

Ping pong is an Olympic sport, yet we often think of it more casually. "Some of us have memories of being in a dorm room or in a parents' or grandparents' basement playing foosball and table tennis," Lehnhoff noted, "but if you look up highlights on YouTube of Olympic players, you see something different."

And research reveals a positive social emotional impact, from brain health to community and connection. Lehnhoff tells the story of one student who joined the team because she didn't have many connections in junior high. "[Table tennis] just became her thing," he recalled. "It just brought her to life, and it affected her in her academics and her social life. And I have multiple stories of that where it just positively influenced them. Once she got to high school, she even said, 'Hey, Mr. Lehnhoff, I've got the confidence now to try out for volleyball.' And she learned that she loved it. So it led to other opportunities where she was like, I would have never tried this if I didn't gain confidence in [table tennis] first."

Lehnhoff is passionate about helping other schools get started with the sport because he has seen the difference it can make. Those who would like more information may contact him at slehnhoff@sangabrielacademy.org. ●

Outdoor Learning Takes Root at Conejo Adventist Elementary School

BY ARAYA MOSS

At Conejo Adventist Elementary School (CAES), kindergarten and first-grade students are learning beyond the walls of the traditional classroom.

Every morning, these young learners have worship outside before heading out to hike one of the various trails around the campus. On these daily excursions, imagination, sense of wonder, and exploration are nurtured as they observe and identify wildlife, talk and collaborate with peers, and move their bodies—all while connecting with God's creation. After the hike, they partner up and rotate through outdoor stations including art, science experiments, playtime, and more before settling back inside their classrooms in the afternoon.

The outdoor learning program was introduced by Joe Fralick, kindergarten teacher. Prior to coming to CAES, Fralick helped create a forest kindergarten program at another school. When he moved from teaching upper to lower elementary at Conejo, he introduced this chaparral experience.

"Outdoor education transforms learning from something children hear about into something they experience," Fralick said. "Instead of sitting at desks, children move, explore, build, observe, and discover using all five senses. Letters are found in sticks and signs, math is practiced by counting rocks and measuring plants, and

science comes alive through real insects, weather, and soil."

"We wanted to create a learning space that reflects how young children naturally learn—through movement, curiosity, and hands-on exploration," added Lisseth Ponce de Leon, first-grade teacher. "We have seen greater focus, joy in learning, improved cooperation, increased confidence, and stronger observational skills."



TOP: Each day begins with songs, prayer, and passing out clipboards with pictures of wildlife to identify that day. **MIDDLE:** Students observe the growth of celery in the nature and science center station. **BOTTOM:** Daily hike.

This marks the first year of this outdoor educational experience at Conejo, during which staff have seen the students grow socially, academically, and spiritually since the start of the school year.

"At Conejo, we really believe in developmental education, especially for the lower grades," said Jennifer Lew, principal. "They're helping each other on their hikes, relying on each other, and supporting each other. It's great social development for the kids to work together as a team. They're doing well in math and reading. Spending time outside hasn't taken time away from any of the core learning; it's actually enhanced it. I think it really helps kids understand God better when they can understand nature."

Conejo plans to continue and develop this outdoor learning program in the years to come. To learn more, visit connejoadventist.org. ●

