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**2023 SCL  
THRIVING SCHOOLS STUDY**

*First Look Report*

June 2023



## A Letter from the President

Dear Heads of School,

As you wind down the school year, I wanted to share some exciting news! For those of you who completed the Thriving Schools Survey, we indicated we would share a summary of the findings once we conducted our analysis. I am happy to announce that we have completed the summative report and attached it for your review. The summative report is a general overview of our findings and will be followed by a much more rigorous analysis and subsequent reporting. The additional reports will be published and discussed throughout the 2023-24 school year. We will also be launching another leadership study in the winter.

SCL is committed to providing the very best leadership training and support available to classical Christian schools. We believe that the success of classical Christian education will only continue to the degree we have capable leaders to sustain it. The data we have collected allows us to do a few important things. First, the data helps us better understand the leadership landscape so we can tailor the support and resources we are providing school leaders. Second, reports like this help us understand trends that accurately capture the needs of the movement, instead of mere anecdotal conjecture. The classical Christian school movement is attracting great talent and strong leaders. Our aim is to ensure boards, heads, and key leaders have the knowledge, tools, and support they need to make their school thrive.

As always, we are eager to hear from you. If you have thoughts, questions, or suggestions, please let us know. We completed this project to help schools be more informed and refine their practices. If you believe we can provide data that would be especially helpful, we would like you to share your ideas. We cannot fulfill every request, but if we understand what is valuable to you, we can make sure we are producing reports, analyses, and communication that is informed by your input.

Thank you, again, for your participation in the Thriving Schools Survey! We pray you find the report insightful. Thanks also to Dr. Brian Polk, our School Improvement Director, as well as Dr. Albert Cheng and the University of Arkansas Classical Research Lab.

In Christ,

Eric Cook  
President, SCL



## 2023 Thriving Schools Study: First Look

Albert Cheng, Brian Polk, and Eric Cook

### Introduction

School leaders play a critical role in the success and sustainability of classical Christian schools, especially now in a moment where interest in classical education is surging across the United States. In 2010, there were about 140 classical Christian schools in operation. Today, there are over 700! It will take significant and consistent effort to invest in classical Christian school leaders to ensure that both newly-founded and long-running classical Christian schools as well as the classical Christian education movement writ large will flourish in forthcoming years.

Yet what, exactly, is the state of classical Christian school leadership in the movement? And how are the schools fairing? To address these questions, SCL administered a first-of-its-kind survey this year. This survey, dubbed the *Thriving Schools Study*, will enable SCL to gather important demographic information on schools and school leaders and to evaluate the health and needs of classical Christian school heads across the United States. This data will ultimately inform SCL's efforts to offer tailored support, resources, and professional development to classical Christian schools.

Between January and March, 148 heads of schools completed the survey questionnaire, querying them about their professional backgrounds, professional training, personal wellbeing, and relationship quality with the board. The survey also asked heads of school about various aspects of their respective schools, including fiscal health, organizational trust, climate, leadership challenges, and the quality of relationships between students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders.

In this report, we provide a first look into a small portion of the findings from the survey. Among them are:

- **School Age:** A disproportionate number of schools have only opened recently. The youngest fifth of schools represented in the data have been in operation for five years or less, while the next fifth have been in operation for more than five but at most 15 years. The remaining three-fifths of schools range from 16 to over 100 years old. The median age of the schools in the sample is 18 years.
- **Thriving, Established, or Emerging:** When asked whether they would consider their school as “thriving, established, or emerging,” just under one quarter of heads of school selected “thriving.” Another 35 percent of heads of schools selected “established.” The remaining 42 percent said that their school was

“emerging.” These ratings are strongly related to school age. Ninety percent of schools that have been in operation for five years or less were rated as “emerging.” Nearly half of the schools that were rated “thriving” have been in operation for more than 15 years.

- **Heads of School Experience:** The mean age of heads of schools in the survey sample is 48 years. These heads have accumulated 20 years of experience in education, on average. Of these 20 years, about 12 were spent in classical education. The 40 percent of heads who had experience in traditional public school districts, spent an average of nine years working in that sector. Heads of school in our sample are also, on average, serving their seventh year in their current position. However, it remains imperative to cultivate the leadership pipeline. One quarter of heads in the sample reported that they expect to be in their position for only three additional years or less, while half of the heads reported that they expect to be in their position for seven additional years or less.
- **Student and staff composition:** The average enrollment across all schools and all grades is about 230 students. However, enrollment at most schools is not at capacity, especially at the 9th- through 12th-grade levels. Although average enrollment at the 9th through 12th grades is 62 students, this number is only 53 percent of schools’ maximum enrollment at those grade levels. Students currently fill about 80 and 71 percent of available seats at the Kindergarten through 5th grades and the 6th through 8th grades, respectively. Meanwhile, schools have an average of 36 full-time (or full-time equivalent) employees, 5 of whom are administrators and 22 of whom are teachers.
- **Fiscal health:** Nearly 75 percent of heads of school indicated that they “agree” or “strongly agree” that their institution is in a good financial position. However, among schools that are no more than five years old, 67 percent of heads of school shared that assessment. Among schools that are at least 15 years old, 78 percent of heads of school shared that assessment. Moreover, half of heads reported that difficulties with the school budget and financial instability are one of the more challenging parts of their job. That said, the average hard-income to expense ratio stands at 117% for the 2022-23 school year. The average-hard income ratio was less than one at 98% and 95% for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, respectively.
- **Trust within the school community:** Heads of school generally reported high levels of trust between students, parents, teachers, heads, and the board, though levels of trust vary across each particular group within the school community. For instance, almost all heads (98 percent) agreed that the students trust their teachers. However, a slightly smaller proportion of heads (89 percent) agreed that teachers trust administrators and parents trust the school. While 90 percent of heads agreed that the board trusts them, 85 percent of heads agreed that they trust the board.

Over the next several months, SCL will release a series of reports and other literature that more rigorously documents and explores the full range of results from the *Thriving Schools Study*.



## The Shifting Educational Landscape

In the fall of 2020, traditional public school enrollment declined by an estimated 1.1 million students. This change represents a 3 percent decrease since the 2019-20 school year. These declines also varied by grade with enrollment at the prekindergarten and kindergarten grades decreasing by 13 percent.<sup>1</sup> According to Stanford University researchers, 26 and 14 percent of this decline can be explained by increases in enrollment in homeschooling and private schooling, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Another major shift in the educational landscape within the past five years is the expansion of hybrid homeschooling, microschooning, and other alternative models where students do not necessarily meet at school for five days each week. School closures and the remote learning that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic helped to make these models plausible and popular. Indeed, one out of every five schools in the *Thriving Schools Survey* sample are not five-days-per-week schools.

Whether families recently have decided to explore private, full-time homeschooling, or part-time homeschooling options, many families have opted to provide their children with a classical education. The growth of classical private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling options has led educational commentators like Harvard history professor James Hankins to describe the present moment as a “renaissance” of classical education.<sup>3</sup> But the growing interest in classical education predates the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, enrollment in classical charter schools in Texas has increased sevenfold since 2011, while enrollment in other charter schools has only doubled over the same time period.<sup>4</sup> The hunger “to develop the whole person by reconnecting knowledge and virtue,” to use The University of Tulsa Honors College’s dean, Jennifer Frey, has been percolating for several years prior to what may be a watershed moment today.<sup>5</sup>

This current surge of interest in classical education is reflected in our survey data. Although our sample is not necessarily representative of all classical schools in the United States—we focused specifically on classical Christian schools, the data indicate a recent explosion of new schools opening. As shown in Figure 1, 20 percent of schools in the sample have been in operation for only five years or less, whereas only 8 percent of schools have been in operation for six to ten years. Meanwhile, schools that have been in operation for 16 to 20, 21 to 25, or 26 to 30 years, each comprise 16 percent of all schools in the sample. The median age of the schools represented in the sample is 18 years.

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<sup>1</sup>Dee, T.S., Huffaker, E., Phillips, C., & Sagara, E. (2022). The revealed preferences for school reopening: Evidence from public-school disenrollment. *American Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312221140029>; National Center for Education Statistics. (2021, June 28). Nation’s public school enrollment dropped 3 percent in 2020-21. Washington, DC: The United States Department of Education. [https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press\\_releases/06\\_28\\_2021.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/06_28_2021.asp)

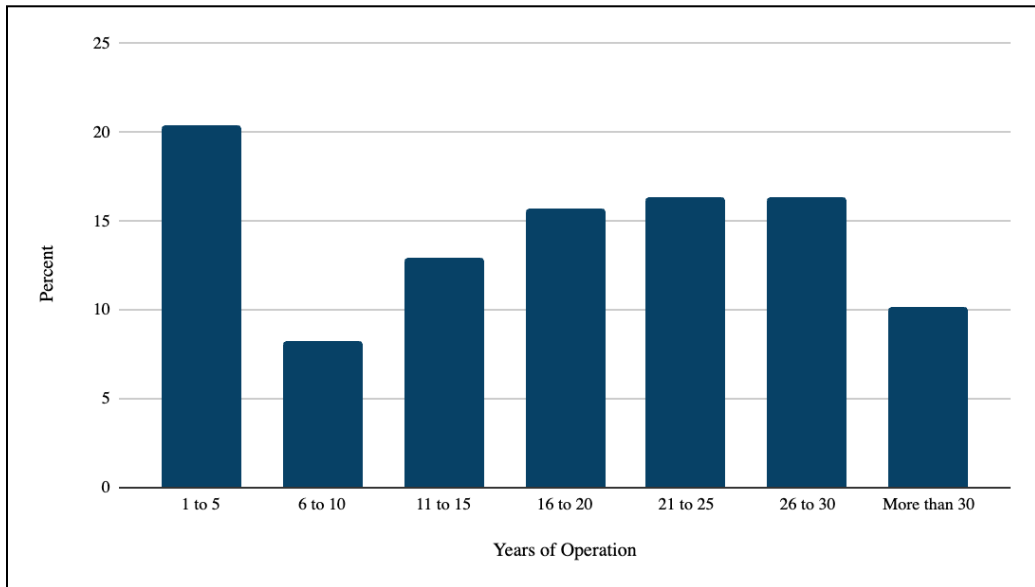
<sup>2</sup>Dee, T.S. (2023). Where the kids went: Nonpublic schooling and demographic change during the pandemic exodus from public schools. Washington DC: Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/where-kids-went-nonpublic-schooling-and-demographic-change-during-pandemic>

<sup>3</sup>Hankins, J. (2022, April 26). The Renaissance of the classical school. *First Things*. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/04/the-renaissance-of-the-classical-school>.

<sup>4</sup>Cheng, A. & Syftestad, C. (2023). The Demand of Texas Parents for Classical Charter Schools. Austin, TX: Texas Public Policy Foundation.

<sup>5</sup>Frey, J. (2021, November 4). Reconnecting knowledge and virtue. *Flypaper Blog*. Washington, DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Institute. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/reconnecting-knowledge-and-virtue>.

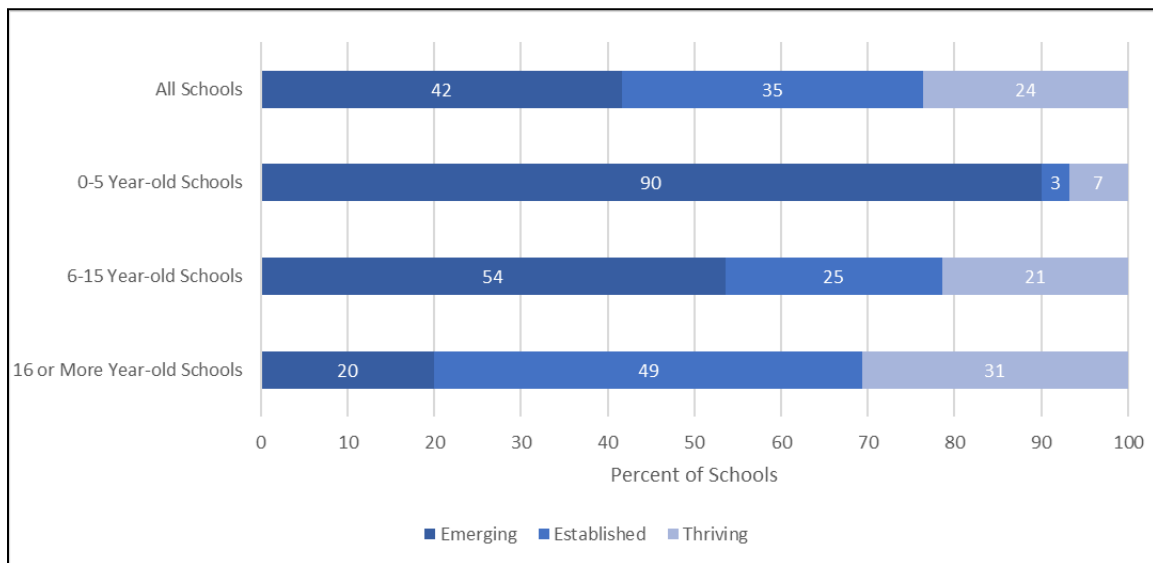
*Figure 1: School Age*



**Thriving, Established, or Emerging**

How well do heads of school think these schools are faring? To the heads of school who took the survey, we posed the question: “Overall, would you consider your school thriving, established, or emerging?” As shown in the top bar in Figure 2, 42 percent of them characterized their school as “emerging.” Another 35 percent characterized their school as “established,” and the remaining 24 percent characterized their school as “thriving.”

*Figure 2: Are Schools Thriving, Established, or Emerging?*



However, these ratings significantly depend upon the age of the school. Disaggregating these results by schools that have been in operation for 0 to 5, 6 to 15, and 16 or more years, we find that the youngest schools are

disproportionately more likely to be characterized as “emerging.” Ninety percent of heads at schools that are no more than five years old selected this rating. Meanwhile, just over half of heads at schools that are between 6 and 15 years old selected this rating. Only one out of every five of the oldest schools did the same. In contrast, 31 percent of heads at schools that were at least 16 years old characterized their school as “thriving.” In fact, half of all schools that were characterized as “thriving” are at least 16 years old.

Although there are numerous other reasons for why heads might consider their school as emerging, established, or thriving, the patterns in Figure 2 underscore the need to adequately support new schools, particularly in our current moment when many of them are now being founded.

### **Heads of School Profiles**

In a February 2023 Lamplighter newsletter, SCL President Eric Cook wrote that the classical Christian school movement “must have strong leaders for our schools to thrive and for our families to be served well.”<sup>6</sup> A first step to ensuring that adequate leaders are available is to take stock of who the current leaders are. How many years of experience do they have, for example? In what prior leadership roles have they served? What is their educational background?

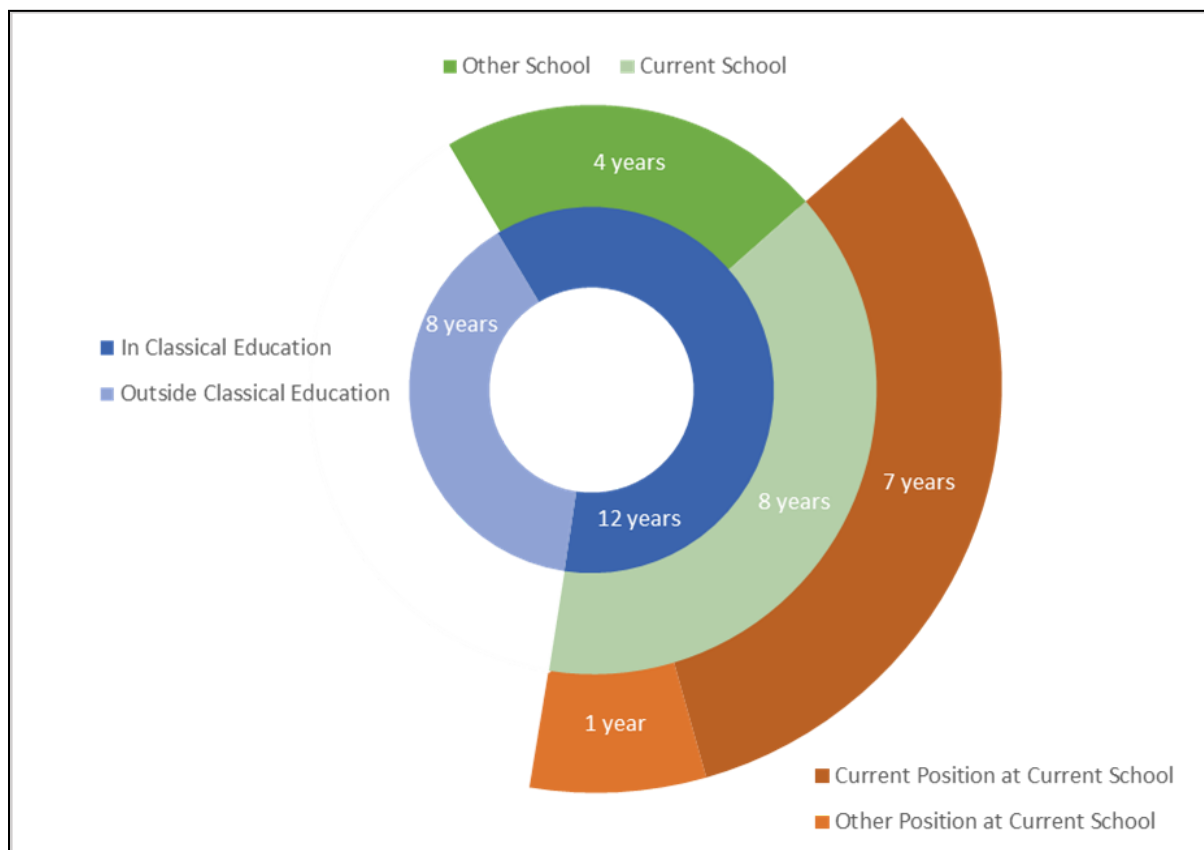
In our sample of 148 heads of school, 70 percent are male and almost all of them are white (96 percent). The average age among these heads is 48 years, and the average number of years of experience in education among these heads is 20 years. As shown in the innermost ring of Figure 3, a majority of these years were spent in classical education—12 years, on average, to be specific. The remaining 8 years were spent outside classical education. According to additional data collected in the survey, a majority of heads (60 percent) do not have any experience working in traditional public school districts. The 40 percent of heads who have experience in traditional public school districts worked an average 9 years in that sector.

Heads of school also reported how many years they have served at their school and in their current position. As shown in the middle ring of Figure 3, out of the 12 years that they have worked in classical education, these heads are, on average, in their eighth year at their current school. The other four years were spent in another school or institution in classical education. Finally, as shown in the outermost ring which disaggregates the eight years spent in the current school into time in current position and time in another position, we find that the typical head is in the seventh year of his or her current position. In other words, heads of schools typically serve only one year at their current school before becoming head. The average amount of time left on their current contract is about three years. Additionally, 65 percent of heads have served in their positions for six years or less. All of these data points warrant attention and focus as we seek to extend the longevity of heads, which is an essential element of a thriving school.

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<sup>6</sup> Cook, E. (2023, Feb 2). Announcing the 2023 SCL Thriving Schools Study. *The Lamplighter*. Richmond, VA: Society for Classical Learning. <https://societyforclassicallearning.org/2023-scl-thriving-schools-study>.

*Figure 3: Average Number of Years in Education, Classical Education, Current School, and Current Position for Heads of School*



We additionally asked heads of school to indicate whether or not they served in a variety of leadership roles such as board member, financial officer, dean of students, dean of faculty, an assistant head of school, or department head prior to becoming head of school. The vast majority of heads of school did not have any experience in these roles. The prior role most commonly held by heads of school is board member, but only 29 percent of heads have such experience. Only 15 percent of heads had prior experience as an assistant head of school. In contrast, 79 percent of heads had experience as classroom teachers at some point.

The lack of experience in prior leadership roles underscores the relative inexperience of heads of school in leadership, at least when it comes to serving in a formal leadership capacity. Developing opportunities to acquire leadership experience and seasoning as heads of school prior may be beneficial for individuals who may one day occupy that position. In fact, this task of developing new leaders is all the more urgent when we consider how long current heads of schools expect to continue serving in that role. When we asked heads how much longer they expected to be in their current position, one quarter said that they expect to be in their position for only three additional years or less. Half of the heads said that they expected to be in their position for seven additional years or less.

One quarter of heads of school in the sample do not have a degree beyond a bachelor's. Of the three-quarters of respondents with an advanced degree, the most commonly earned credential is a master's degree in education



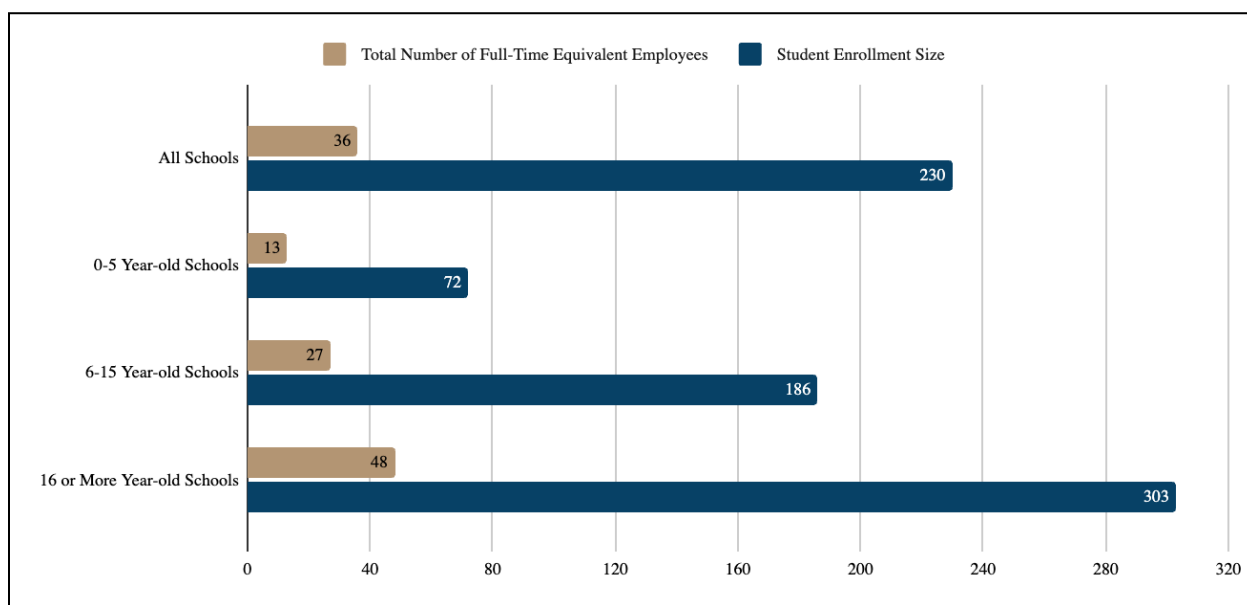
followed by a master's degree in another field. Specifically, 44 and 42 percent of advanced-degree holders possess a master's degree in education and another field, respectively. In contrast, only a little over 10 percent of advanced-degree holders have a Doctor of Education or Education Specialist degree. Meanwhile, 12 percent of heads hold a Master of Divinity and 6 percent of heads hold a Master of Theology.

Whether these credentials have or have not sufficiently prepared heads of school for their leadership positions is a separate and, perhaps, more important issue. To that end, we will release a report in the future that discusses pressing organizational challenges faced by heads of school and their professional development needs. That report will also present findings about the personal wellbeing of heads of school and the quality of their relationships with other stakeholders such as teachers, the board, students, and parents.

### School Profiles: Student and Staff Composition

Student enrollments at schools represented in the *Thriving Schools Study* vary widely, spanning from 15 to 1,405 students. School size varies, perhaps unsurprisingly, by school age with smaller enrollments at newer schools. As shown in Figure 4, schools no more than 5 years old have an average of 72 students. Average enrollments increase to 186 and 303 students for schools that are between 6 and 15 years old and schools that have been in operation for more than 15 years, respectively.

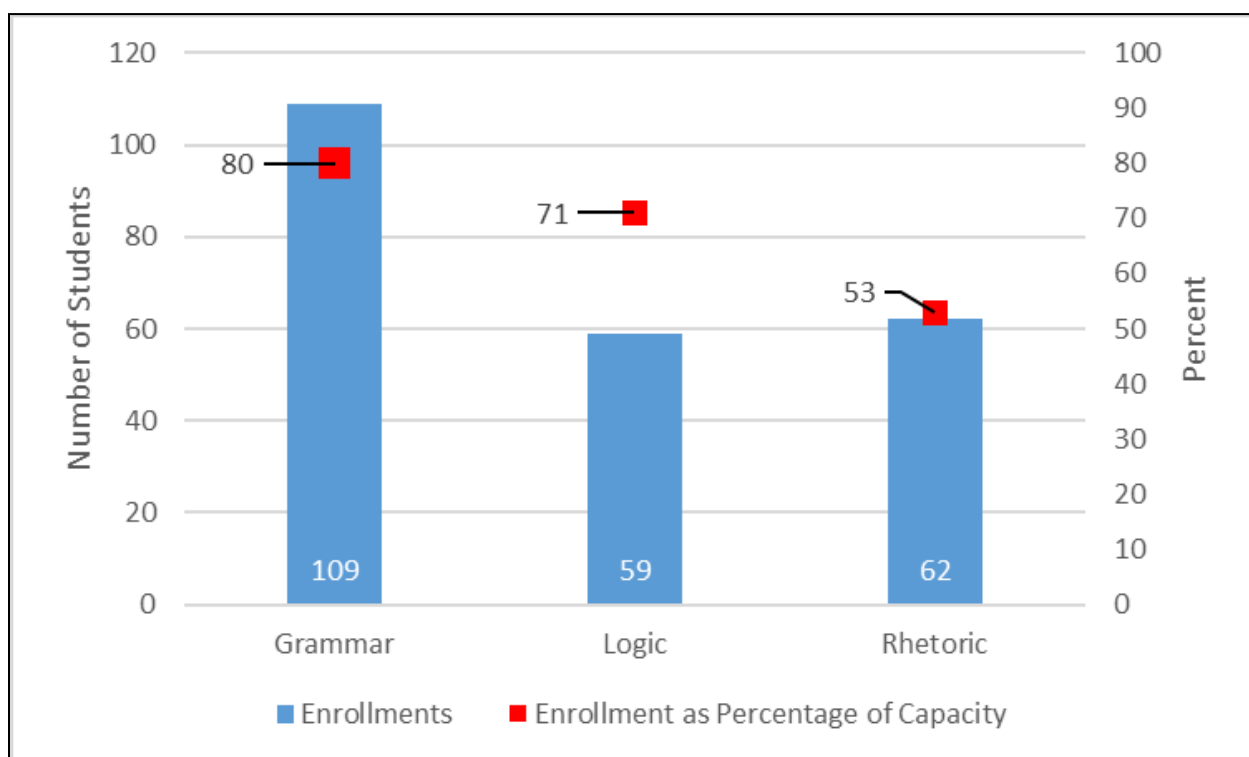
**Figure 4: Student Enrollment and Full-Time Equivalent Employees Overall and by School Age**



The total number of full-time equivalent employees also tracks with school age, which is also depicted in Figure 4. Schools have 36 full-time equivalent employees, on average, making for just over a 6 to 1 student to employee ratio. Meanwhile, schools no more than 5 years old have 13 full-time equivalent employees, about half the number as schools between 6 to 15 years old and nearly four times less than the number for schools older than 15 years. Of the 36 full-time employees that work at the average school, 5 are administrators and 22 are teachers. The remainder is made up of teaching aides and other staff members.

Student enrollment additionally varies across grade levels. These patterns are displayed in Figure 5. The average enrollment size is highest at the grammar level (Kindergarten through 5th grades) at 109 students and declines to about 60 students at the Logic (6th through 8th grades) and Rhetoric (9th through 12th grades) levels. Schools are generally not operating at capacity, especially at the Rhetoric levels where enrollment is only 53 percent of the maximum number of students schools can take at that level. Students currently fill about 80 and 71 percent of available seats at the Grammar and Logic levels, respectively. As much as classical Christian schools are growing, they have yet to solve the “empty seat” problem, especially at the higher grade levels which are even more expensive to operate.

*Figure 5: Student Enrollment Size and Capacities by Grade Level*



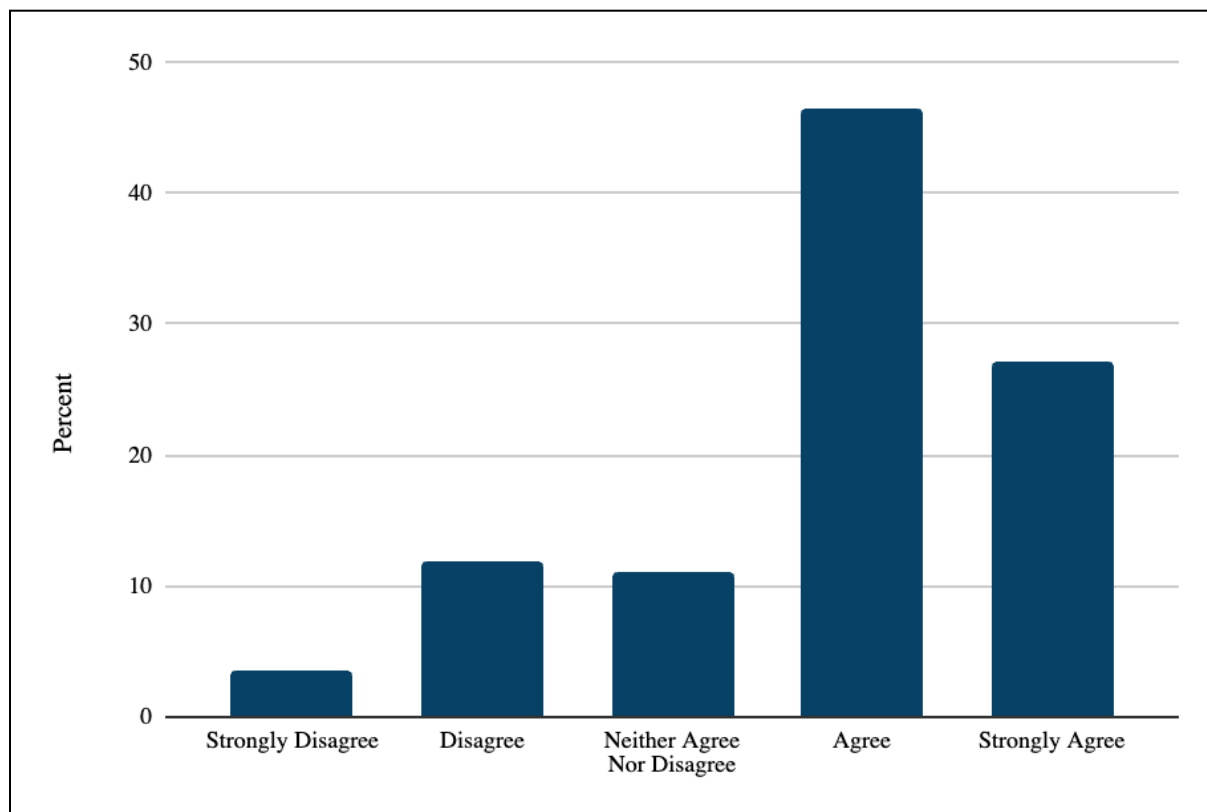
### Fiscal Health

How are the schools in the *Thriving Schools Study* faring? Though future reports will cover other aspects of these schools, we focus particularly on fiscal health in this report. In the survey, we asked heads to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “Overall, my institution is in a good financial position.” Their responses are shown in Figure 6.

About three out of every four heads were in agreement with this statement. While 47 percent of heads said that they “agree” with the statement, 27 percent gave a more favorable assessment, saying that they “strongly agree” with the statement.

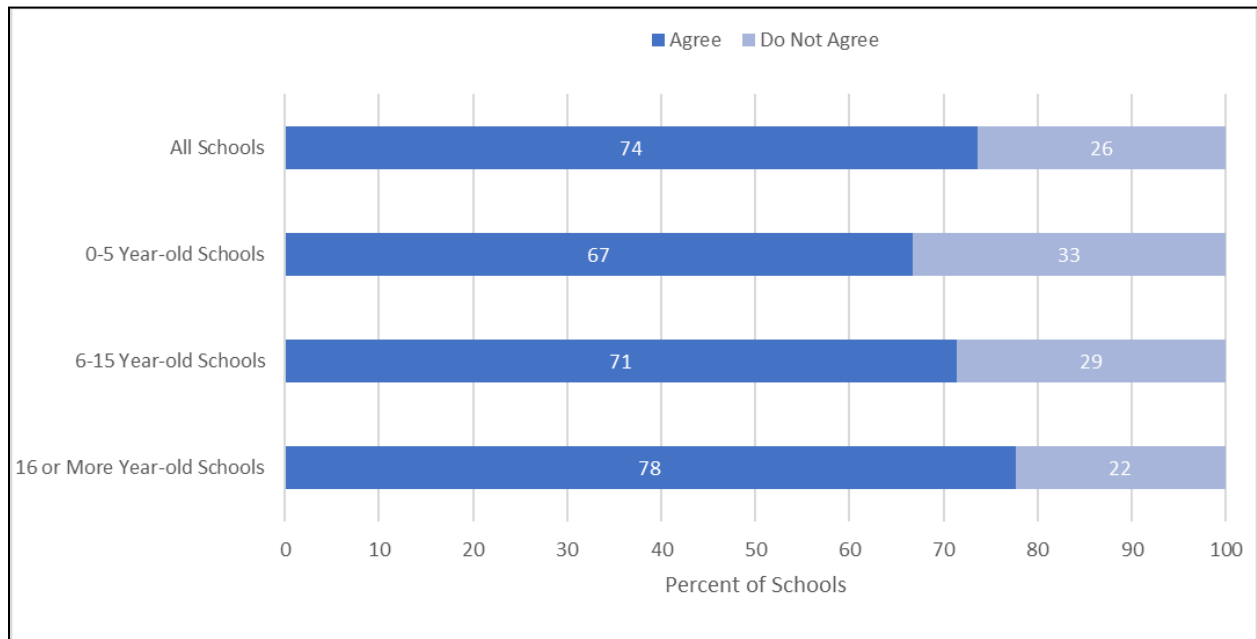
On the other hand, one in ten heads said that they “neither agree nor disagree” that their “institution is in a good financial position.” Another 12 percent of heads said that they “disagree” with the statement. Finally, almost 4 percent of heads said that they “strongly disagree” with the statement.

*Figure 6: Overall, My Institution is in a Good Financial Position*



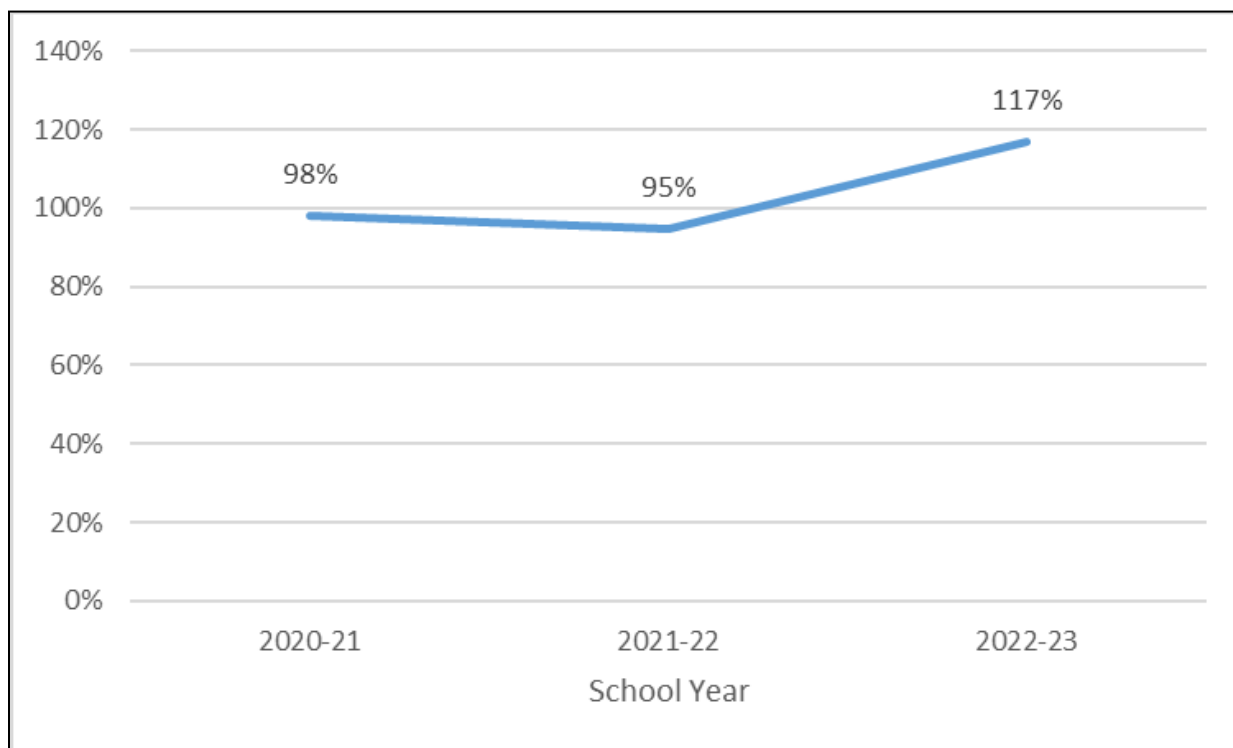
Disaggregating these responses by school age, we observe that heads of newer schools are less likely to give a positive assessment of their school’s financial situation. As shown in Figure 7, among schools that are no more than five years old, 67 percent of heads of school shared that assessment. Among schools that are at least 16 years old, 78 percent of heads of school shared that assessment.

*Figure 7: Agreement with “Overall, My Institution is in a Good Financial Position” by School Age*



There is room to improve the overall fiscal health of classical Christian schools, and fortunately, there seems to be some progress on this issue. One measure of fiscal health is the hard-income to expense ratio. Hard-income refers to revenue from tuition, fees, and other sources after tuition discounts are subtracted. Expenses refers to operating expenditures, including depreciation and debt service. Figure 8 plots the average hard-income to expense ratios for all schools between the 2020-21 school year and the 2022-23 school year. Although hard-income to expense ratios were less than 100% in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, indicating a greater amount of expenditures than revenue for the average school, the ratio has flipped and increased to 117% in the 2022-23 school year.

*Figure 8: Hard-income to Expense Ratios for the 2020-21 through the 2022-23 School Years*

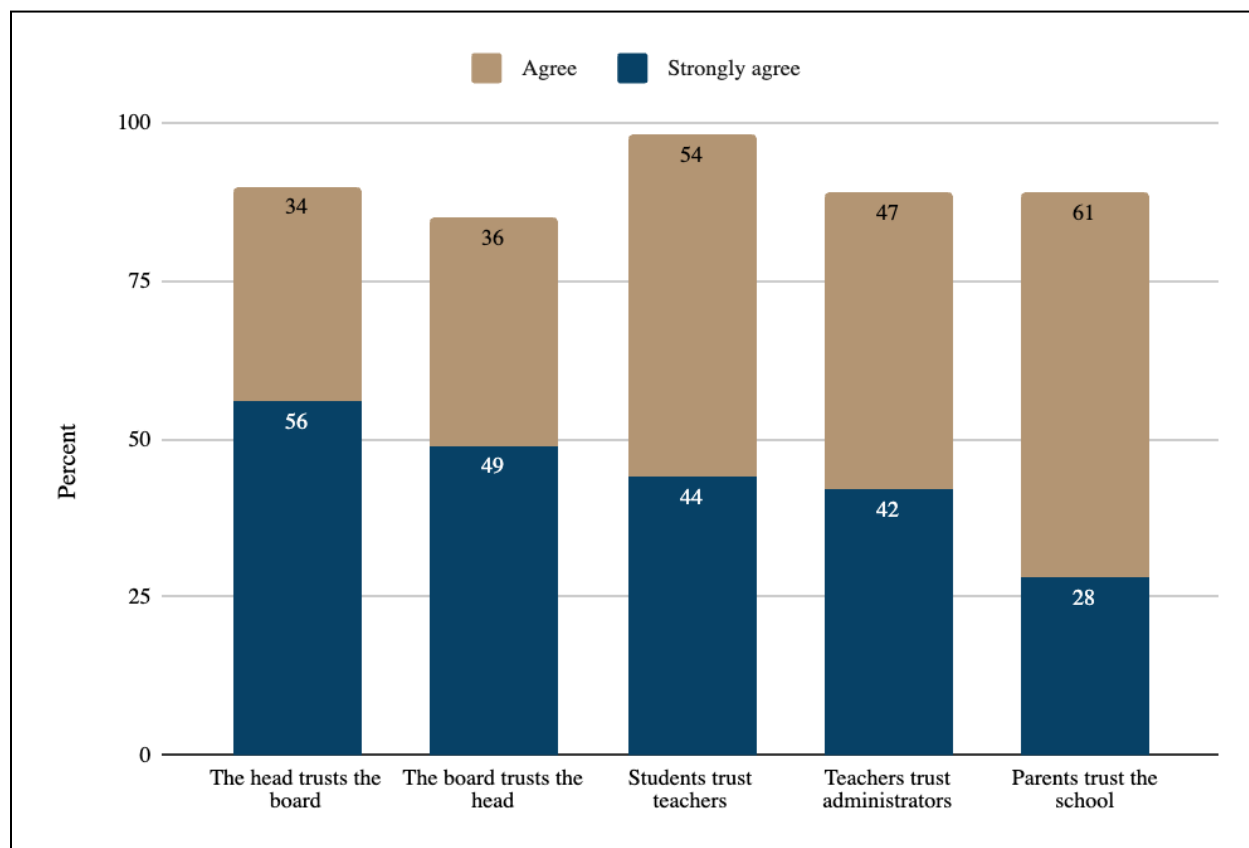


These averages, of course, obscure variation in fiscal circumstances across individual schools and irregular year-to-year fiscal shocks that may arise. We also caution against drawing conclusions about trends based on three years of data. More importantly, despite improving hard-income to expense ratios and most heads agreeing that their school is in good financial health, about half of heads report that difficulties with the school budget and financial instability are one of the more challenging parts of their job. Identifying schools and providing resources to aid leaders in stewarding school finances is, therefore, an ongoing priority for SCL.

### **Trust within the School Community**

Another aspect of school health that we considered in the *Thriving Schools Study* is the level of trust that exists between members of the school community. As shown in Figure 9, levels of trust within schools represented in the sample are quite high, though it is unclear the extent to which social desirability bias may be inflating these measures. Moreover, there is variation in levels of trust, depending on which members of the school are being considered. For example, when we asked heads of school to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “The head trusts the board,” 90 percent of heads expressed some form of agreement. In fact, 56 percent of heads strongly agreed with the statement and 34 percent merely agreed. On the other hand, when presented with the statement “The board trusts the head,” 85 percent of heads agreed, with nearly half of heads expressing strong agreement. Nearly all heads (98 percent) expressed agreement with the statement “students trust teachers,” though only 44 percent of heads expressed strong agreement. Finally, 89 percent of heads agreed with the statements “teachers trust administrators” and “parents trust the school.” Although 42 percent of heads strongly agreed with the former statement, only 28 percent of heads strongly agreed with the latter statement.

*Figure 9: Trust within the School Community*



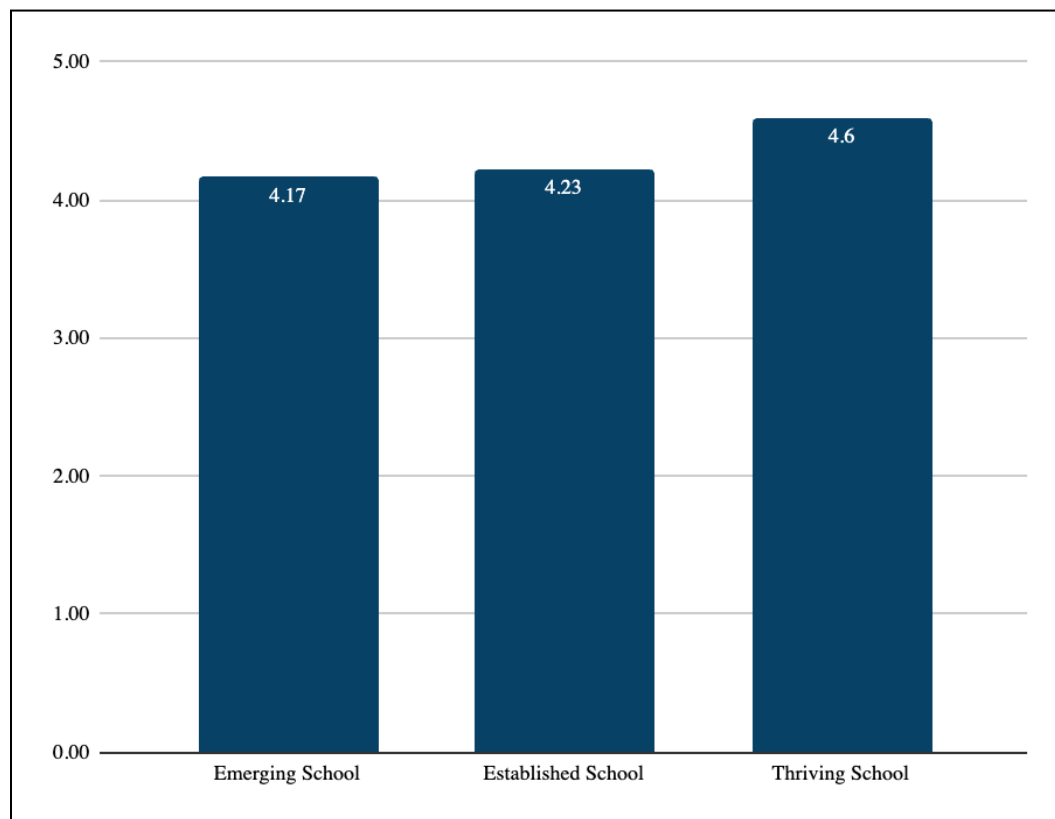
Cultivating trust is crucial for schools to thrive. Scholars, for example, have documented the role trust plays in sustaining school improvement efforts.<sup>7</sup> Others suggest that trust is essential for effectively evaluating teachers<sup>8</sup> and school leaders<sup>9</sup>. These observations are consistent with what is borne out in the *Thriving Schools Study* data when we compare levels of trust between emerging, established, and thriving schools. Taking the responses to the five statements about trust listed in Figure 9 and aggregating them to create a trust score, we find that thriving schools stand out from emerging and established schools on this measure. These results are shown in Figure 10. While the average trust score among emerging and established schools is 4.2, the average trust score among thriving schools is 4.6. The difference of 0.4 scale points in the trust scores between thriving and established or emerging schools is statistically significant and nearly an entire standard deviation in magnitude — a sizeable gap for any measure.

<sup>7</sup> Bryk, A.S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. Chicago: American Sociological Association.

<sup>8</sup> Lacireno-Paquet, L., Bocala, C., & Bailey, J. (2016). *Relationship between School Professional Climate and Teachers' Satisfaction with the Evaluation Process* (REL 2016–133). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>9</sup> Mott, W.R. (2018). *Healthy Boards - Successful Schools*. Henderson: Fitting Words.

*Figure 10: Trust in Emerging, Established, and Thriving Schools*



## Conclusions

One of the goals of SCL's *Thriving Schools Study* is to educate classical Christian schools about the state of leadership in the movement. Having this understanding of the state of leadership is a first step to identifying and creating opportunities for leadership development and support. On that note, one of the key findings from the *Thriving Schools Study* is that only about one quarter of heads of schools characterize their schools as thriving. This proportion is even lower among the newest schools. How can more schools be enabled to attain that status? Over the next several months, we will continue analyzing data from the *Thriving Schools Study* and releasing new reports to answer that question. These reports will cover additional topics including head of school wellbeing, the state of professional development opportunities for heads and educators, board health, and school climate. These reports will also take a deeper look at some of the topics discussed in this report such as fiscal health, enrollments, and staffing.

We hope these data catalyze conversation and initiatives that contribute to the sustainability of the classical Christian school movement. These conversations and initiatives are increasingly necessary not simply because interest in classical education is growing but also because the classical movement is poised to lead as paradigmatic shifts in the social imaginary about education unfold.