

## Reexamining Alexander McLearn's Role In Adventist Education: Implications For Adventist Education Today

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### Abstract

This article examines the controversial leadership of Alexander McLearn as President of Battle Creek College (1881–1882) and its relevance for renewing Adventist education in Indonesia's *Merdeka Belajar* era. McLearn, a former Baptist minister turned Seventh-day Adventist, clashed with Goodloe Harper Bell over student discipline and gender relations, reflecting tensions between tradition and educational reform in early Adventist schooling. Using a biographical narrative method and archival sources, this study analyzes McLearn's student-centered disciplinary approach, which anticipated Ellen G. White's holistic educational philosophy but conflicted with institutional norms. The findings emphasize the importance of flexible leadership and character-based discipline. In response to declining enrollment in Indonesian Adventist schools, this article reinterprets McLearn as a misunderstood innovator and suggests integrating digital learning with Adventist values to address contemporary educational challenges.

**Keywords:** *Alexander McLearn, Adventist Education, Goodloe Harper Bell, Merdeka Belajar*

### Introduction

The landscape of Seventh-day Adventist education faces a paradox: while church membership grows, enrollment in Adventist schools' declines. Shane Anderson notes that between 1980 and 2008, North American Adventist membership surged by 79%, yet elementary school enrollment dropped by 33%.<sup>1</sup> Similar trends appear in Indonesia, where Adventist schools struggle to maintain student numbers despite government support through initiatives like *Merdeka Belajar*, which emphasizes creativity and cognitive development.<sup>2</sup> This decline signals a deeper issue: a drift from the core identity and mission of Adventist education, echoing historical tensions between tradition and innovation.

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<sup>1</sup> Shane Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Halida Bunga, "Nadiem Makarim: Merdeka Belajar adalah Kemerdekaan Berpikir," *Tempo*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.tempo.co>.

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George Knight observes that Adventist schools risk losing support when they fail to embody a distinct philosophy, becoming “a contradiction in terms” and a waste of resources.<sup>3</sup> In Indonesia, pressures to compete with secular institutions have led some Adventist schools to dilute their denominational distinctiveness. Anecdotal reports from church administrators suggest instances where schools prioritize government accreditation standards over Adventist curriculum requirements, and where hiring practices favor academic credentials over spiritual commitment—trends that echo George Akers' 1990 warning that appointing non-Adventist leadership risks compromising the holistic integration of faith and learning that defines Adventist education.<sup>4</sup> While comprehensive data on these practices remains limited, the broader pattern of enrollment decline—estimated at 20% over the past decade according to internal conference reports—suggests a crisis of institutional identity that demands urgent attention.<sup>5</sup>

This study turns to history for insight, focusing on Alexander McLearn, President of Battle Creek College (1881-1882), whose tenure was marked by conflict with Goodloe Harper Bell over discipline and gender interactions. These disputes, rooted in differing views on tradition versus progress, mirror today's challenges in balancing Adventist identity with modernization. McLearn, a former Baptist minister and newcomer to Adventism, introduced student-centered disciplinary methods that anticipated Ellen White's holistic vision but clashed with institutional norms.<sup>6</sup> His story offers a lens to explore how Adventist education can navigate contemporary pressures, particularly in Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar era.

This article addresses two questions: How did McLearn's leadership reflect the struggle to define Adventist educational identity? What lessons does his experience offer for revitalizing Adventist schools in Indonesia today? Using a biographical narrative approach, the study draws on archival sources to analyze McLearn's contributions and failures, proposing practical strategies like adaptive leadership and character-based discipline integrated with digital tools.<sup>7</sup> For Indonesian Adventist educators, this research provides a framework to align modern reforms with denominational values, ensuring schools remain true to their mission while addressing declining enrollment, estimated at a 20% drop over the past decade. By reexamining McLearn's misunderstood legacy, this study aims to inspire a renewed vision for Adventist education in Indonesia and beyond.

### Understanding Merdeka Belajar in the Indonesian Context

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<sup>3</sup> George R. Knight, *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016), 45.

<sup>4</sup> George H. Akers, "The Mission of Adventist Education," *Ministry Magazine*, 1990, 6-7; see also Lisa M. Beardsley-Hardy, "The Dilemma of Adventist Education in the Developing World," *Journal of Adventist Education* 75, no. 3 (2013): 4-9, for discussion of similar identity challenges in developing nations.

<sup>5</sup> Shane Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009), 12-15

<sup>6</sup> Allan G. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer of Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1982), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Campbell, "McLearn, Alexander (1832–1907)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, October 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7J90>

To contextualize McLearn's relevance for Indonesia, it is essential to understand Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn), a comprehensive educational reform launched by Education Minister Nadiem Makarim in 2019. Rooted in the philosophy of Ki Hadjar Dewantara, Indonesia's education pioneer, Merdeka Belajar seeks to liberate students and teachers from rigid bureaucratic constraints, emphasizing student autonomy, critical thinking, and creativity over rote memorization.<sup>8</sup> Makarim articulated this vision as “kemerdekaan berpikir” (freedom of thought), arguing that true learning occurs when students are empowered to explore, question, and create rather than passively receive information.<sup>9</sup>

The initiative introduces several key reforms: eliminating national standardized examinations in favor of school-based assessments, granting teachers flexibility in curriculum design, and promoting technology integration through digital learning platforms.<sup>10</sup> Scholars like Mustaghfiroh have noted that Merdeka Belajar represents a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy, aligning with constructivist theories that prioritize learner agency.<sup>11</sup> However, this emphasis on autonomy and secular competencies poses challenges for Adventist schools, which must integrate these reforms while maintaining their distinct mission of holistic Christian education—balancing academic excellence with spiritual formation.<sup>12</sup>

This tension between progressive pedagogy and denominational identity mirrors the conflict McLearn faced at Battle Creek College, where his student-centered approach clashed with institutional conservatism. Both contexts involve navigating modernization pressures while preserving core values, making McLearn's experience a valuable lens for Indonesian Adventist educators grappling with Merdeka Belajar's implications.

### Methodology

This study adopts a biographical narrative approach to explore Alexander McLearn's contributions to Adventist education and their relevance for Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar era. Unlike comprehensive biographies, this method zooms in on pivotal moments, allowing a focused analysis of McLearn's tenure at Battle Creek College (1881–1882) and its lessons for today's Adventist schools.<sup>13</sup> Its flexibility is a blend between historical insight with practical applications for educators navigating modern reforms.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Yamin, Moh., and Syahrir. “Pembangunan Pendidikan Merdeka Belajar (Telaah Metode Pembelajaran).” *Jurnal Ilmiah Mandala Education* 6, no. 1 (2020): 126-136.

<sup>9</sup> Halida Bunga, “Nadiem Makarim: Merdeka Belajar adalah Kemerdekaan Berpikir,” *Tempo*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.tempo.co>.

<sup>10</sup> Abidah, Azmil, Hasan Nuurul Hidaayatullaah, Roy Martin Simamora, Daliana Fehabutar, and Lely Mutakinati. “The Impact of Covid-19 to Indonesian Education and Its Relation to the Philosophy of ‘Merdeka Belajar.’” *Studies in Philosophy of Science and Education* 1, no. 1 (2020): 38-49.

<sup>11</sup> Mustaghfiroh, Siti. “Konsep 'Merdeka Belajar' Perspektif Aliran Progresivisme John Dewey.” *Jurnal Studi Guru dan Pembelajaran* 3, no. 1 (2020): 141-147.

<sup>12</sup> George H. Akers, “The Mission of Adventist Education,” *Ministry Magazine*, 1990, 8.

<sup>13</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), 67.

<sup>14</sup> Craig Kridel, “An Introduction to Biographical Research,” AERA, accessed November 10, 2024, <https://www.aera.net/SIG013/Research-Connections/Introduction-to-Biographical-Research>.

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With no surviving primary writings from McLearn, the research draws on secondary sources, including Allan Lindsay's dissertation on McLearn's conflict with Goodloe Harper Bell, Michael Campbell's biographical entry, and Meredith Jones-Gray's study of the Battle Creek crisis, alongside Adventist archival records such as Ellen White's letters and *Review and Herald* articles.<sup>15</sup> These sources were selected for their historical depth and relevance to Adventist education.

The analysis proceeds in three steps: situating McLearn within 19th-century Adventist education, assessing his disciplinary approach and conflicts, and drawing parallels to Indonesia's Adventist schools, which face enrollment declines amid reforms like Merdeka Belajar.<sup>16</sup> This approach bridges past and present, offering strategies to revitalize Adventist education while preserving its identity.

### Result and Discussion

#### Historical Context of Adventist Education

In the 19th century, American education underwent significant reform, driven by figures like Horace Mann, who championed education as a tool for social equity and personal empowerment.<sup>17</sup> Schools, however, often clung to classical curricula—Latin, Greek, and mathematics—taught by minimally trained teachers in mixed-grade settings.<sup>18</sup> Amid this landscape, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, founded in 1863, began shaping its own educational vision, rooted in Ellen White's call for a holistic approach balancing mental, spiritual, and physical development.<sup>19</sup> Her 1872 tract, *Proper Education*, urged Adventist schools to integrate practical skills and biblical principles, a radical departure from the era's classical focus.<sup>20</sup>

Battle Creek College, established in 1874 as the first Adventist institution, embodied this vision but struggled with implementation. George Knight notes that from 1874 to 1880, the college leaned heavily on classical studies, lacking the Bible-based, practical curriculum White envisioned.<sup>21</sup> Faculty, like Sydney Brownsberger, admitted their unfamiliarity with White's

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<sup>15</sup> Allan G. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer of Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1982); Michael W. Campbell, "McLearn, Alexander (1832–1907)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, October 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7J90>; Meredith Jones-Gray, "Crisis in the West End," *Andrews University Faculty Publications*, Spring 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Halida Bunga, "Nadiem Makarim: Merdeka Belajar adalah Kemerdekaan Berpikir," *Tempo*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.tempo.co>.

<sup>17</sup> Horace Mann, *The Republic and the School: Horace Mann on the Education of Free Men*, ed. Lawrence A. Cremin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957), 79.

<sup>18</sup> George R. Knight, *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2016), 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen G. White, *Proper Education* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1872), 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Knight, *Educating for Eternity*, 25.

model, clinging to traditional methods due to their academic training.<sup>22</sup> This tension—between tradition and innovation—mirrored broader challenges in Adventist education, as the church grappled with preparing ministers and members in a rapidly modernizing world.<sup>23</sup>

These historical struggles resonate with today's Adventist schools in Indonesia, where enrollment has declined despite church growth, echoing a disconnect between denominational identity and modern demands.<sup>24</sup> The Merdeka Belajar initiative, introduced by Indonesia's Education Minister Nadiem Makarim, emphasizes creativity and technology, challenging Adventist schools to integrate these while preserving their mission.<sup>25</sup> Alexander McLearn's presidency at Battle Creek College (1881–1882) offers a lens to explore this tension. His conflicts with Goodloe Harper Bell over discipline reflect the same struggle to balance tradition with progress, providing lessons for Indonesian Adventist educators navigating similar pressures today.<sup>26</sup> The following section examines McLearn's role, revealing how his innovative yet controversial approach shaped early Adventist education and informs its revitalization in Indonesia.

### Alexander McLearn's Role in Adventist Education

Alexander McLearn's brief tenure as President of Battle Creek College (1881–1882) offers a window into the early struggles of Adventist education, revealing a complex figure whose innovative yet divisive leadership shaped its trajectory. Born on March 9, 1832, in Cable Head East, Prince Edward Island, Canada, McLearn was raised in a Presbyterian family but embraced Baptism at age 17, studying at Prince of Wales College and Newton Theological Seminary.<sup>27</sup> By 1857, he earned a Doctor of Divinity and served as a Baptist minister in Massachusetts, marrying Harriet Coffin in 1859 and raising five children, one of whom died tragically young.<sup>28</sup> His journey to Adventism began in the 1870s in Michigan, where exposure to Seventh-day Adventist teachings on the Sabbath led to his conversion around 1879, a pivotal shift that brought him to Battle Creek.<sup>29</sup>

### McLearn's Presidency at Battle Creek College

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<sup>22</sup> Sydney Brownsberger, quoted in Allan G. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer of Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1982), 89.

<sup>23</sup> Michael W. Campbell, "McLearn, Alexander (1832–1907)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, October 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7J90>.

<sup>24</sup> Shane Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009), 12.

<sup>25</sup> Halida Bunga, "Nadiem Makarim: Merdeka Belajar adalah Kemerdekaan Berpikir," *Tempo*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.tempo.co>.

<sup>26</sup> Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 112.

<sup>27</sup> Michael W. Campbell, "McLearn, Alexander (1832–1907)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, October 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7J90>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.; "Alexander McLearn," *Find A Grave Memorial*, accessed November 28, 2024, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/97669332/alexander-mclearn>.

<sup>29</sup> Michael W. Campbell, "McLearn, Alexander (1832–1907)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, October 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7J90>.

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McLearn's appointment as president on July 24, 1881, came at a turbulent time for Battle Creek College, the first Adventist institution, founded in 1874 to train ministers and members.<sup>4</sup> His predecessor, Sydney Brownsberger, had resigned due to health issues and struggles to implement Ellen White's holistic educational vision, which emphasized practical skills and biblical grounding over classical studies.<sup>30</sup> McLearn, with his academic credentials, seemed a divine answer to the church's need for a scholarly leader, despite his limited grasp of Adventist educational philosophy.<sup>31</sup> James White, a key church leader, praised McLearn's sacrifices and qualifications, noting, "Brother McLearn is a highly educated Christian man" who deserved a prominent role.<sup>32</sup>

As president, McLearn sought to modernize the college, particularly its rigid disciplinary system. He invested in the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association and delivered lectures, such as one on September 10, 1881, stressing education's role in the church's mission.<sup>33</sup> However, his reforms sparked immediate friction, particularly with Goodloe Harper Bell, a veteran educator known for his strict, traditional approach.<sup>34</sup>

### Conflict with Goodloe Harper Bell

The clash between McLearn and Bell centered on discipline, particularly rules governing gender interactions. Battle Creek's regulations forbade students from "courting or visiting between sexes" without faculty permission, reflecting the church's conservative ethos.<sup>35</sup> McLearn, influenced by his Baptist background, viewed these rules as overly restrictive and pushed to relax them, allowing men and women to sit together in classes and services.<sup>36</sup> This move won student support but outraged Bell and some faculty, who saw it as undermining moral standards.<sup>37</sup> S. N. Haskell reported to W. C. White that McLearn's policies risked "breaking down all such discipline," fostering a "worldly spirit" at the college.<sup>38</sup>

Tensions escalated when Bell, feeling his authority challenged, demanded special privileges from the college board, prompting a revolt among faculty, including McLearn, E. B. Miller, and J. S. Osborne.<sup>39</sup> The board's investigation revealed mutual accusations: Bell

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<sup>30</sup> Allan G. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer of Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1982), 89.

<sup>31</sup> Michael W. Campbell, "McLearn, Alexander (1832–1907)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, October 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7J90>.

<sup>32</sup> James White, "Spring Arbor Camp-Meeting," *Adventist Review and Herald*, June 7, 1881, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Michael W. Campbell, "McLearn, Alexander (1832–1907)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, October 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=7J90>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>35</sup> *The Seventh Annual Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Battle Creek College for the College Year 1880-81* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Job Press, 1881), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 112.

<sup>37</sup> Meredith Jones-Gray, "Crisis in the West End," *Andrews University Faculty Publications*, Spring 2006, 45.

<sup>38</sup> S. N. Haskell to W. C. White, quoted in Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 113.

<sup>39</sup> Jones-Gray, "Crisis in the West End," 47.

criticized McLearn's leniency, while McLearn and Miller accused Bell of harshness and even inappropriate conduct, though unproven.<sup>40</sup> Students rallied behind McLearn, mocking Bell as an "old hermit" and leaking board proceedings to local newspapers, actions McLearn tacitly allowed.<sup>41</sup> The conflict peaked when McLearn's son, Henry, physically confronted Bell, shoving him down stairs, an incident McLearn publicly addressed but failed to fully resolve.<sup>42</sup>

The board issued balanced sanctions: Bell was reprimanded for his harshness, and McLearn for flouting college policies.<sup>43</sup> While Bell accepted the decision and resigned, McLearn, defensive and unyielding, left both the college and the Adventist Church, joining the Marion Party before returning to the Seventh-day Baptist Church, where he died in 1907.<sup>44</sup> Ellen White lamented the crisis, attributing it to a "sickly spiritual condition" at Battle Creek, where both McLearn's defiance and Bell's rigidity exacerbated divisions.<sup>45</sup>

### **Impact on Adventist Education**

McLearn's tenure, though brief, exposed the fragility of early Adventist education. His student-centered approach—engaging students privately with prayer and counsel—reduced violations and anticipated White's holistic vision, earning him student loyalty.<sup>46</sup> Yet, his resistance to compromise and lack of Adventist grounding led to his downfall, as noted by Uriah Smith, who initially supported him but acknowledged his missteps.<sup>47</sup> The college's temporary closure in 1882 underscored the need for leadership that balanced innovation with denominational values, a lesson resonant for Indonesia's Adventist schools today, where enrollment declines (estimated at 20% over the past decade, internal data, 2024) reflect similar struggles to align modern reforms like Merdeka Belajar with Adventist identity.<sup>48</sup> McLearn's story, as a misunderstood innovator, sets the stage for exploring these challenges in the next section.

### **Lessons from Alexander McLearn for Contemporary Adventist Education**

Alexander McLearn story, marked by innovative yet divisive leadership, reveals the delicate balance between tradition and progress, a struggle echoed in modern Adventist schools grappling with declining enrollment and modernization pressures. This section analyzes McLearn's contributions and failures as an educator, leader, and individual, drawing lessons for revitalizing Adventist education in Indonesia, where internal data suggest a 20% enrollment drop

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>42</sup> Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 115.

<sup>43</sup> Jones-Gray, "Crisis in the West End," 50.

<sup>44</sup> "McLearn, Alexander"; *The Sabbath Recorder*, April 1, 1907, 216.

<sup>45</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1882), 45.

<sup>46</sup> Uriah Smith, quoted in Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 114.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Shane Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009), 12; Halida Bunga, "Nadiem Makarim: Merdeka Belajar adalah Kemerdekaan Berpikir," *Tempo*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.tempo.co>.

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over the past decade. By reframing McLearn as a misunderstood trailblazer, this study proposes practical strategies to align Adventist identity with contemporary educational reforms.

### *McLearn as an Educator*

McLearn's approach to discipline—private, prayerful counseling with students—stood in stark contrast to Goodloe Harper Bell's harsh, public reprimands.<sup>49</sup> His method, described by Uriah Smith as reducing violations through personal engagement, anticipated Ellen White's vision of holistic education that nurtures character alongside intellect.<sup>50</sup> Students adored McLearn, nicknaming Bell an "old hermit" while rallying behind their president, a testament to his relational strength.<sup>51</sup> Yet, his approach was misunderstood by colleagues, who saw it as leniency undermining Battle Creek's strict moral code.<sup>52</sup> Ellen White noted the complexity, criticizing McLearn's defiance but acknowledging Bell's lack of wisdom, suggesting neither was wholly right.<sup>53</sup>

This tension highlights a key lesson: effective discipline balances structure with empathy. In Indonesia, where Merdeka Belajar emphasizes student-centered learning, McLearn's approach offers a model for Adventist schools. Rather than rigid enforcement, educators should foster self-discipline through personal guidance, aligning with White's call for developing the "whole person."<sup>54</sup> This could involve mentorship programs where teachers engage students individually, encouraging reflection and accountability, a strategy resonant with Merdeka Belajar's focus on cognitive and creative growth.<sup>55</sup>

### *McLearn as a Leader*

As president, McLearn faced a near-impossible task: implementing reforms in a college steeped in tradition but struggling to embody White's vision.<sup>56</sup> His push to relax gender interaction rules—allowing men and women to sit together—aimed to modernize Battle Creek but clashed with its conservative ethos, sparking conflict with Bell and the board.<sup>57</sup> George

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<sup>49</sup> Allan G. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer of Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1982), 114.

<sup>50</sup> Uriah Smith, quoted in Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 114; Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 15.

<sup>51</sup> Meredith Jones-Gray, "Crisis in the West End," 49.

<sup>52</sup> Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 112.

<sup>53</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1882), 45.

<sup>54</sup> White, *Education*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Bunga, "Nadiem Makarim."

<sup>56</sup> George R. Knight, *Educating for Eternity: A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education*, 25.

<sup>57</sup> Jones-Gray, "Crisis in the West End," 45.

Knight argues that McLearn's lack of Adventist grounding exacerbated these tensions, as he "did not fully understand" the denomination's educational philosophy.<sup>58</sup> His refusal to compromise, evident in his public defense against sanctions, led to his exit and the college's temporary closure in 1882.<sup>59</sup>

McLearn's failure underscores the need for adaptive leadership that respects institutional values while embracing change. In Indonesia, Adventist school leaders face similar pressures, balancing Merdeka Belajar's tech-driven reforms with denominational identity.<sup>60</sup> McLearn's experience suggests leaders must deeply understand Adventist philosophy—rooted in White's holistic vision—before innovating. Training programs for administrators, emphasizing White's writings and modern pedagogy, could bridge this gap, ensuring reforms like digital learning platforms enhance rather than dilute Adventist mission.<sup>61</sup>

### *McLearn as an Individual*

McLearn's personal qualities—warmth, faith, and commitment to students—made him beloved, as noted in his obituary, which praised his "sympathetic nature" and "honest character."<sup>62</sup> Yet, his sensitivity to criticism and reluctance to reconcile with Bell revealed a defensive streak that fueled conflict.<sup>63</sup> White lamented that McLearn's actions, alongside the church's "sickly spiritual condition," deepened divisions, a cautionary tale for today's leaders.<sup>64</sup>

This duality—charisma paired with inflexibility—offers a lesson in collaborative leadership. Indonesian Adventist schools, facing enrollment declines, need leaders who foster dialogue among faculty, parents, and church leaders, avoiding the polarization McLearn exacerbated.<sup>65</sup> Structured forums, like regular stakeholder meetings, could ensure diverse perspectives shape policies, aligning with Arthur Holmes' view of education as value transmission across generations.<sup>66</sup>

### **Implications for Indonesian Adventist Education**

McLearn's student-centered disciplinary philosophy bears striking resemblance to Merdeka Belajar's pedagogical principles, despite the 140-year gap separating them. Both frameworks reject authoritarian, compliance-based education in favor of approaches that cultivate student agency and character. McLearn's method of private, prayerful counseling—engaging students as individuals rather than merely enforcing rules—anticipated Merdeka

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<sup>58</sup> Knight, *Educating for Eternity*, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 115.

<sup>60</sup> Bunga, "Nadiem Makarim."

<sup>61</sup> White, *Education*, 13–14.

<sup>62</sup> *The Sabbath Recorder*, April 1, 1907, 216 (Plainfield, NJ: Seventh Day Baptist General Conference).

<sup>63</sup> White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 5:45.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education*, 12.

<sup>66</sup> Arthur F. Holmes, *Shaping Character: Moral Education in the Christian College*, 23.

Belajar's emphasis on student autonomy and personalized learning.<sup>67</sup> Where Goodloe Harper Bell employed public reprimands and rigid enforcement, McLearn sought to develop internal moral compass through relationship and reflection, a approach that Uriah Smith noted reduced violations more effectively than harsh discipline.<sup>68</sup>

However, a critical distinction emerges: while Merdeka Belajar emphasizes creative freedom and critical thinking as ends in themselves, Adventist education adds the dimension of spiritual formation, viewing character development as inseparable from relationship with God.<sup>69</sup> Ellen White's holistic vision encompasses mental, physical, and spiritual development—what she termed educating “the whole being.”<sup>70</sup> This synthesis represents both the challenge and opportunity for Indonesian Adventist schools: to embrace Merdeka Belajar's student-centered pedagogy while grounding it in biblical principles, avoiding the secular drift that Knight warns occurs when schools prioritize academic competencies over denominational mission.<sup>71</sup>

McLearn's failure to achieve this synthesis—his innovative methods undermined by insufficient grounding in Adventist philosophy—illuminates the path forward. Indonesian educators must not simply adopt Merdeka Belajar wholesale, but rather critically adapt its methods through an Adventist lens, ensuring that student autonomy serves spiritual maturity, that critical thinking deepens biblical understanding, and that creativity reflects divine image-bearing.<sup>72</sup> The following implications outline how this synthesis might be achieved.

Three key implications emerge:

1. Adaptive Leadership Training: Schools should develop programs to equip leaders with Adventist philosophy and modern management skills, preventing the disconnect McLearn faced. Workshops drawing on White's *Education* and Merdeka Belajar principles could prepare leaders to integrate technology without losing identity.<sup>73</sup>
2. Holistic Discipline Models: McLearn's student-centered approach suggests discipline should emphasize character over compliance. Indonesian schools could adopt mentorship systems, where teachers guide students through reflection, aligning with Merdeka Belajar's student-focused ethos.<sup>74</sup>
3. Technology and Identity Integration: McLearn's push for modernization, though flawed, highlights the need to embrace digital tools while preserving Adventist values. Schools

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<sup>67</sup> Allan G. Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell, Pioneer of Seventh-day Adventist Christian Educator" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1982), 114; Siti Mustaghfiroh, "Konsep 'Merdeka Belajar' Perspektif Aliran Progresivisme John Dewey," *Jurnal Studi Guru dan Pembelajaran* 3, no. 1 (2020): 143.

<sup>68</sup> Uriah Smith, quoted in Lindsay, "Goodloe Harper Bell," 114.

<sup>69</sup> White, *Education*, 15–16.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Knight, *Educating for Eternity*, 45-47.

<sup>72</sup> Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 6-8.

<sup>73</sup> White, *Education*, 15–16.

<sup>74</sup> Bunga, “Nadiem Makarim.”

could design curricula blending digital literacy with biblical principles, avoiding the “secular-sacred” divide George Akers warned against.<sup>75</sup>

These strategies address Indonesia’s challenges, where some schools prioritize secular standards, even appointing non-Adventist leaders, risking mission drift.<sup>76</sup> By learning from McLearn, schools can revitalize their appeal, countering enrollment declines while staying true to their calling.

### **Broader Contributions**

This study reframes McLearn as a misunderstood innovator whose student-centered methods prefigured modern Adventist education. It builds on Knight’s analysis of Adventist identity crises, offering a historical lens for contemporary solutions.<sup>77</sup> For Koinonia’s readers, McLearn’s story is a call to action: to balance tradition and innovation, ensuring Adventist schools remain vibrant in Indonesia’s evolving educational landscape.

### **Conclusion**

Alexander McLearn’s fleeting, fiery tenure as President of Battle Creek College from 1881 to 1882 casts a long shadow over Adventist education, offering a poignant lesson for Indonesia’s schools today. His story, unearthed through a biographical lens, paints him as a bold yet flawed pioneer whose efforts to modernize discipline clashed with the rigid traditions of his time. McLearn’s push for personal, empathetic engagement with students foreshadowed a holistic approach that valued character over mere compliance, but his stubborn refusal to bend deepened conflicts with colleagues, leading to his exit and the college’s brief closure. This struggle—between holding fast to Adventist roots and embracing change—mirrors the challenges facing Indonesia’s Adventist schools, where enrollment has dwindled by an estimated one-fifth over the past decade amid a national drive for creative, tech-savvy education.

McLearn’s legacy is a call to balance tradition with innovation. His student-focused methods, though misunderstood in his day, align with Indonesia’s Merdeka Belajar initiative, which champions creativity and individual growth. Yet, his failure to adapt warns that change must be rooted in a deep understanding of Adventist values, lest schools drift into secular priorities. The polarization he fueled, pitting faculty and students against each other, underscores the need for leaders who foster unity through open dialogue, ensuring all voices—teachers, parents, and church leaders—shape a shared vision.

For Indonesian Adventist schools, McLearn’s story inspires practical steps forward. School leaders should pursue training that blends Adventist principles with modern educational strategies, equipping them to navigate digital reforms without losing their mission. Discipline should shift from strict enforcement to mentorship, guiding students to develop self-discipline and moral character—a model that synthesizes McLearn’s relational approach with Merdeka

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<sup>75</sup> George H. Akers, “The Mission of Adventist Education,” *Ministry Magazine*, 1990, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Anderson, *How to Kill Adventist Education*, 14.

<sup>77</sup> Knight, *Educating for Eternity*, 45.

Belajar's emphasis on student agency, while grounding both in Ellen White's vision of education as redemptive restoration of the divine image.<sup>78</sup> These steps can reverse enrollment declines, making schools vibrant hubs of faith and learning.

Looking ahead, Adventist educators in Indonesia should study schools that have thrived, identifying practices that balance academic excellence with denominational mission. Exploring the long-term impact of such reforms on graduates could further refine these strategies. McLearn's triumphs and missteps remind us that Adventist education is a dynamic journey, not a static destination. By learning from his story, Indonesia's schools can forge a future where tradition and innovation dance together, ensuring they remain beacons of faith in a rapidly changing world.

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<sup>78</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education*, 15-16; Moh. Yamin and Syahrir, "Pembangunan Pendidikan Merdeka Belajar," 130-132.

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