

Why the Lutheran School Matters

Supporting Change



By Rev. William Beckmann (pictured at right)

First, a disclaimer. I come from a four-generation Lutheran-school family. My late wife attended a Lutheran elementary and secondary school as well as Concordia Teachers College, River Forest. Her parents both attended a Lutheran elementary school. Our two sons and three grandchildren attended Lutheran schools, too. I missed out and attended an Episcopal grade school because my parents wanted a solid education in a Christian setting for me and my brother, and at the time there were no Lutheran schools on our end of Long Island where I grew up. So if my bias for the Lutheran school shows, well, that was the plan!

That said, it's important to ask the questions:

Does it matter if Lutheran congregations establish and maintain schools?

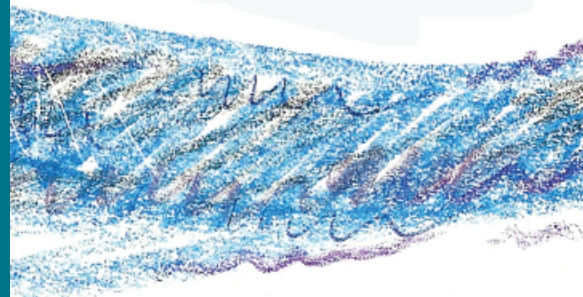
In the present economy, is it wise stewardship to channel precious funds into the school?

Is the Lutheran school worth it?

Martin Luther was deeply committed to schooling the young, and the Reformation was as much concerned with schools and education as it was with church and home. In his letter “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” in 1524, Luther pressured civic leaders as well as parents to provide Christian schools and see that children attended them. He was convinced that knowledge of the liberal arts—history, language and the like—provides the best context for the study of Scripture. One of his last acts was to establish a school in Eisleben, where he died in 1546.

In the 1600s, as Swedes, Austrians, and Saxons arrived in the United States, they often built the school before the church. Schools opened in New York, the Carolinas, Georgia, and New Orleans. These schools usually had two purposes: to teach the language of the fatherland and to train children in God's Word and Luther's Catechism.

When the LCMS was organized in 1847, the first constitution





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provided for publishing books for Christian education and that Christian education was to be a condition of membership.

The Handbook of the LCMS states: “The most effective education agencies available to the church for equipping children and youth for ministry are the full-time Lutheran elementary and secondary schools, so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ may become even more effective in the life of the individual Christian and of the congregation.”

Why is it important for Lutheran churches to operate Christian schools? Over the course of time, the answer hasn’t always been the same. In the early days of America and Canada, church members were immigrants wanting to preserve their language and culture for the children and in so doing, bring children up

in the faith they loved so dearly. Language and culture are not dominant reasons for establishing schools today, but the need to teach the truths of God’s Word continues.

Missions and Christian education have always been important pillars of every congregation. Both proclaim the Gospel—that Good News of Jesus Christ. If mission refers to sharing the Gospel with those who have never heard it, Christian education is sharing that same Good News with those who have heard it and by the power of the Holy Spirit believe it, but continue to need to hear it for growth and nurture. As Peter wrote in his letter, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:16 ESV)

How does this all take place?

It happens in the Lutheran school, where the Gospel is shared in word and action by more than the daily chapel service and religion class.

Certainly public schools do try to teach morality and values. A popular program, *Character Counts*, seeks to do just that. But like other similar programs, it faces a major handicap: it cannot teach how morality can be attained. For example, a school can teach that greed is wrong, but it cannot turn to the Gospel which frees one from the power of self. With values changing as they do, public schools turn to clarifying values rather than establishing them. The Lutheran school exists to help parents, the primary communicators of Christian faith and values to their children, do their job.

Professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, from 1920-1953, Dr. John H. C. Fritz had this to say about why he wanted a Christian school for his children: “A physician writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* wrote, ‘I believe that in the child’s early start on an unbalanced diet, in the long continued total

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or partial absence of essential food elements, we see the explanation of many of the metabolic disorders of middle life.’

“What is true in respect to the body is true also in respect to the soul. The spiritual deficiencies and disorders in later life can, as a rule, be traced to the total or partial absence of essential elements in early training or to an unbalanced diet in early life, that is, a training which did not take care of the whole man.”

What is the Lutheran school advantage? Milo Brekke¹, drawing from data compiled for “A Study of Generations,” determined that students who attend Lutheran schools:

- Evidenced greater clarity on the way of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ
- Have more biblical knowledge
- Report a much fuller devotional life
- Are more active in witnessing to others about Jesus and His church
- Have a balanced doctrine (neither liberal nor ultra conservative)
- Practice reasonable respect for authority
- Are more likely to be forgiving with other people, yet know that such acts will not earn them salvation



The Lutheran school offers the congregation and its pastor some unique opportunities for Word and Sacrament ministry. The school provides a powerful witness to the community about support for children and youth. It offers opportunity to teach the faith to children of all families of the congregation and is a major player in a congregation’s evangelism outreach. The educators and staff of the school provide a larger professional talent pool for the many ministries and programs of the congregation. The church’s music ministry is enriched





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How do congregations and their pastors support the Lutheran school? Does it make a difference in the health and future of the church that congregations support schools? When church and school are united in ministry—a seamless ministry—outreach to the community is a given. A seamless ministry looks at the school as an outreach ministry of the congregation. As one family in the congregation where I worship said, “We came for the school and stayed for the church!”

The Lutheran school reaches out to families who do not have a living faith in Jesus Christ, becoming a mission outpost that shares the caring Christ. It is amazing how children bring that message home to their parents.


The Lutheran school reaches out with the Gospel, but it is also an arm that reaches in as well. The Gospel can become real when the child reaches home and shares his/her faith and parents have faith conversations with the family. Consider this: at the dinner table the first grader tells the family, “We learned a new prayer to say when we eat. Can I say it now?” Or, at the funeral home the fourth grader tells everyone within listening distance, “Grandpa knew Jesus loved him.”

In the past Lutheran schools served well to preserve the language of the fathers and plant the faith in the hearts of the young. Today Lutheran schools continue to plant that same faith while reaching out into the community. Bill Cochran, Executive Director of LCMS Schools writes, “Lutheran schools celebrate their unique ministry to children and the families they serve. We have an opportunity to share the message with the community in which our schools are located...that Lutheran schools are Christ-centered, academically strong, and respectfully operated.”

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Endnotes:

1. Milo Brekke, *How Different Are People Who Attend Lutheran Schools* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974.)

 See **Review, Reflect, Resolve** on page 38 for discussion questions about the topics covered in this article.