

## It's 2012 – What School and Early Childhood Education Models are Working? Who's Struggling? Who's Not?

The Evangelical Lutheran Education Association is “home” in a variety of ways to approximately 1600 elementary and secondary schools and early childhood education programs of the Church. While ELEA serves primarily weekday education programs of the ELCA, a variety of other church bodies are represented in small numbers as well.

Since restructuring of the ELCA Churchwide organization in recent years, all responsibility for weekday schools and early childhood education programs has come to ELEA, an ELCA-related organization which connects with the Congregational & Synodical Mission unit of the Church. Database maintenance and basic services are provided to all 1600+ programs, but those who pay nominal dues and are members of the Association receive a higher level of services, including the ability to participate in Accreditation, Employee Benefits Plans, Testing Programs, Discount programs, and more. A full description of the organization and its membership benefits can be found at [www.eleanational.org](http://www.eleanational.org).

A common topic of discussion on our email chat groups over recent years, along with discussions at administrator conferences and other professional circles, is concern over declining enrollments and closures of a number of our elementary schools and early childhood education centers. I am frequently asked if I see any patterns or trends that explain why many schools and centers are struggling and yet others fared pretty well all through the recession and now are strong and vibrant, often with waiting lists. Being one who loves statistics and data, I first began studying closure and declining enrollment rates, and then began paying attention to the “why’s”, in addition to just the “what’s”; i.e., the demographics of various areas, services offered by schools and centers, staff qualifications, etc., and trying to determine why some struggle and others do not.

I believe there are a number of factors that come into play that influence success and failure of schools and centers. Some are:

- The growth of charter schools has contributed to declining enrollments in private faith-based elementary schools in many parts of the country; while charter schools in most states are allowed to operate without a lot of quality standards and often with teachers who are not certificated, parents often have a perception that charter schools are “better than” public – indeed on par with private schools, and “free” to boot. Unless they have a strong affinity for faith formation, they become an alternative to our church-based schools.
- The development of University Pre-K or Voluntary Pre-K (state-paid) preschool programs in many states has been both a blessing and a curse to our church-based early childhood programs. Most states which have implemented programs offer free preschool to 4-year-olds, which can then compete with our church-based programs. However, some states have chosen to contract with existing church-based programs to provide those services with a few stipulations related to religious instructions, but in New York, for example, UPK has been a very positive factor in keeping the doors open and covering costs of continuing ed for teachers for many of our church-based programs.

- Many of our schools and early childhood programs are housed in aging facilities (leaky roofs, corroded plumbing, drafty windows, insufficient heating and air conditioning systems – sounds familiar, anyone?). There’s a lot of deferred maintenance which is now catching up with churches, and once you begin one repair/remodel project, it’s a bit of a can of worms and before you know it, additional permits and repairs are being required to bring facilities up to code, usually with limited or no funds to cover the cost. Tuition increases are just not enough to cover the costs.
- Many of our early childhood education programs operate as part-day preschools, with a morning and/or afternoon program which runs 2 ½ - 3 hours per day, anywhere from 2 – 5 days per week. This model worked well for many years. However, in 2010, 23 percent of married-couple family groups with children under 15 had a stay-at-home mother, which means that 77% of the moms are working (we assume that in most cases dad is working too, although the number of stay-at-home dads is rising). In two-working-parent families, the problem becomes: Where is Junior to go before preschool? Who will take him to preschool? Who will pick him up from preschool? Where will he go after preschool? Not to mention the cost factor of paying for preschool and often a full-day child care situation in addition. So, what about that 23% of stay-at-home moms? Compared with working moms, they are:
  - Younger (44 percent were under 35 compared with 38 percent of mothers in the labor force).
  - Hispanic (27 percent compared with 16 percent of mothers in the labor force).
  - Foreign-born (34 percent compared with 19 percent of mothers in the labor force).
  - Living with a preschool-age child (57 percent compared with 43 percent of mothers in the labor force).
  - Without a high school diploma (19 percent versus 8 percent of mothers in the labor force).

Source: America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2007

This means that they are often not in a position to be paying for preschool. This does not even address single mothers or fathers.

There are some neighborhoods in which part-day preschools thrive because the economic base is high enough where many families have nannies that are provided with a 2 ½ hour respite a few days a week while the children are in a part-day program, and of course, grandparents have traditionally been relied upon for before/after school care and transportation. But grandparents are often still working themselves or simply unwilling to devote their life to the care of Junior.

- Roman Catholic schools thrived for generations while charging minimal or no tuition for parishioners because of nuns and monks whose life calling was to provide quality, faith-based education to young minds for free, as part of their religious vocation. In much the same manner, Lutheran schools thrived for generations because of dedicated individuals who worked for next-to-nothing, because they too saw their life calling in providing quality-faith-based education. Not so with Gen X and Gen Y’ers – guess what? They want to be paid! And a living wage no less, comparable to their public school counterparts. And they want to receive employee benefits. And why shouldn’t they?

Well, I could probably go on for another page or two with reasons why I feel so many of our elementary schools and early childhood education centers struggle and ultimately close (the economic downturn of recent years with parents losing jobs, the lack of professional fundraising taking place, the lack of commitment by sponsoring churches, etc.), but I want to turn to a more positive note and answer the question, “What are those schools and centers who are thriving doing differently than the others?”

There’s one main answer - THEY ARE NOT AFRAID TO CHANGE. They think outside the box. They study what parents and children need and want and find ways to meet those needs and wants. They don’t make excuses for why they aren’t growing. They believe God is in charge and trust him while moving forward.

In the words of Martin Luther, “What does this mean?”

- Successful early childhood education programs are increasingly adding ancillary programs and expanded hours to meet the needs of working parents. In some cases this means offering just a few hours before and after a traditional program, but those programs with waiting lists and strong reputations in communities generally are full-day programs, with hours of 6:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. to accommodate a variety of options. I’m not saying full day child care programs are easy to run – I did it myself for many years, and I know the work involved in split shifting employees, providing lunch and naps and a lot more in the way of lesson planning and programming, but I also know the benefits for parents and for children. So many children are “shuffled” – parents often think they’re doing a good thing by having them at preschool M-W-F mornings, with Grandma on Tuesdays, at a neighborhood family child care home M-W-F afternoons, and with Aunt Susie on Thursdays. You now have 5 different sets of rules and expectations, if you count home, and what you usually end up with is challenging behavior.
- Successful early childhood education programs are expanding the ages for which they provide nurture and education – including infants and toddlers, and before/after school age programs for elementary children as well.
- Successful elementary schools are increasingly offering before and after school care programs on site, which include breakfasts and snacks – again, “one stop shopping” for mom and dad.
- Successful schools and centers serving all ages are increasingly adding extra programs to enhance their offerings and to keep mom and dad from having to add these ancillary activities to their already busy schedules. This may include things like: KinderMusic, gymnastics, and sports teams.
- Some successful schools and centers add satellite campuses to provide additional care and education in other neighborhoods that operate in the same high-quality manner.
- Successful schools and centers often employ or have among their board members a professional fundraiser who looks beyond wrapping paper and candy bar sales and takes major gifts, annual fund drives, special events, and/or building endowments seriously.
- Successful schools and centers hire, nurture and retain dedicated, intelligent teachers and support staff. Continuing education is a high priority with a prominent budget line item.

Reviews are done on a regular basis, with goal setting and assistance from administration in attending those goals. Excellence is rewarded.

- Successful schools and centers have made scholarship programs a priority for families that need financial help. Early childhood programs are willing to be an approved program through their State assistance programs, allowing families who are eligible for state aid to consider a faith based center.
- Successful schools and centers generally have a culture of “we can do it”, rather than “we can’t do it”. This is fostered to a large degree by a strong sense of ministry on the part of the sponsoring congregation, where the congregation and its leadership sees the school as an integral part of their ministry – a place viewed as “First Lutheran Church and School”, rather than “First Lutheran Church” – and oh, by the way, we happen to have a school. The education ministry should be in the church’s DNA.
- Successful schools and centers aren’t afraid to put the right people on the bus and ask the wrong people to get off the bus. Churches have historically been afraid to fire anyone and usually wait until a lot of damage is done before they ask a school employee (or any other church employee for that matter) to leave. A common scenario is an administrator who has worked themselves into a comfortable spot, see their retirement not too far away on the horizon, and really don’t want to upset status quo and will often dig their heels in at the thought of major changes.
- Successful schools and centers do not allow gossip and backstabbing among/between staff and volunteers. It is a poison that will infiltrate.
- Successful schools and centers are grounded in God’s word and the staff, families and children all practice their faith with the support and partnership of the sponsoring congregation. They know that weekday ministry is absolutely one of the best forms of evangelism available!

Most of these ideas center around change, and of course, the joke is, “How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?” The answer: “Change?? Why change???”

May God’s strength and grace surround you, as you seek to be the best school or early childhood education center you can.

*Gayle Denny, Executive Director*  
*Evangelical Lutheran Education Association*  
[www.eleanational.org](http://www.eleanational.org)  
800-500-7644