

Evangelical Lutheran Education Association

ELCA Early Learning Center and Church Challenges

Interviews:

- Pastors and church admin- 7
- Preschool directors, staff, and parents- 3

Successes

What's working? What are the positive impacts of the preschools?

Environment

Both pastors and preschool directors expressed how their preschools have loving, nurturing and supportive environments that are accepting of people with different backgrounds. Furthermore, they support children educationally, emotionally *and* spiritually.

Community Engagement

Offering a faith-based education to the community has given families an opportunity to learn more about the ELCA Church and the love of Christ. As many preschool families are not members of their associated ELCA church, these preschools can act as a link to the church. Additionally, for those families specifically looking for a flexible, part-time childcare option, offering a half-day preschool supports these families' educational needs.

Support

How are you connected to a professional network?

While those interviewed either are or recently were a part of the ELEA, most of the preschool directors and church pastors are not involved in professional support networks, including those offered by the ELEA. Many feel like they *do* have groups supporting them, but these groups are not necessarily organized or formal. No pastors interviewed were personally involved in an ELEA network of support. Some expressed that there are not enough resources offered for their role with the preschool. Others feel they don't have enough time to participate in a network or do not want to pay for a network.

Challenges

What are the stress points? What is creating school closures?

Church and Preschool Membership

Very few of the preschool staff and families are members of or attend the affiliated church. Some reasons for this are differing political opinions, the church not offering programming and activities for young families and the lack of an engagement pipeline for preschool staff and families. Many churches interpret this divide as a lack of respect and appreciation.

Family Needs

While many families appreciate the flexibility of half-day childcare, an increasing number of families are in need of a full-day preschool. Some hypothesize that the public preschools increasingly starting to offer full-day, free preschool options is causing a decrease in enrollment, leading to financial stress on the preschool and church.

Financial Responsibility of the Church

Six of the seven churches interviewed stated that the preschool budget falls underneath the budget of the church. When the preschool is hurting financially, the church takes on their financial burden. Difficult financial situations and/or complex financial structures are creating a sense of resentment between the church and the preschool.

Contradictory Opinions and Beliefs

A few of the churches and preschools explained how they tend to have different beliefs and opinions on a multitude of topics; examples include the LGBTQIA+ community, COVID-19 regulations and child safety management. Some preschools believe they are separate entities from the church and do not need to adhere to the beliefs of the church leadership.

Recommendations

Church and Preschool Membership

To strengthen the relationship between the preschool and the church, staff members should be encouraged to participate in church activities and events, and efforts should be made to hire teachers who are aligned in belief or even might already be church members. The church should host welcoming events for preschool families to engage with church life in non-pressured settings, and the senior pastor should regularly show appreciation for preschool staff to foster a supportive environment. Furthermore, communication about the preschool's ministry and its impact should be shared with the congregation to build a unified and symbiotic culture.

Family Needs

To boost enrollment and financial stability, preschools should offer flexible scheduling options, firstly surveying parents and analyzing community trends to identify need. Consider implementing full-day preschool and extended care options, which are increasingly important for Millennial parents, and introduce programs like mother's-day-out for infants and toddlers. Update marketing materials to highlight the unique benefits of your preschool compared to free, public alternatives, focusing on what makes your offerings worth the investment.

Financial Responsibility of the Church

To foster strong financial communication between the church and preschool, consider forming a unified financial board or at least appoint liaisons to ensure clear, ongoing communication. Implement accountability structures and transparency practices as recommended by the ELEA to promote healthy financial responsibility. Provide ELEA resources to support various financial structures and address any tensions arising from financial decision-making processes between the preschool and church.

Contradictory Opinions and Beliefs

To harmonize different beliefs and opinions while ensuring shared vision, mission and values between the church and preschool, facilitate discussions with the senior pastor or between the church and preschool boards to understand belief alignment expectations. Conduct interviews with preschool board members, key teachers or room moms to identify any tensions and issues affecting family trust and comfort. Determine the importance of LGBTQIA+ affirmation and inclusion in the shared vision and form strategies to attract and serve families who may have differing views.

Takeaways

What have you learned? What would you share with others who are considering or currently serving in an educational ministry?

Pastors and preschool directors shared how understanding kids developmentally as well as family needs is key to being successful. Fruit will come from the hard work of educational ministry, but it may be years down the road before the fruit is realized. Pastors shared how it is important to know the theology and mission of both the church and preschool and to try to encourage a cohesive relationship between the two. Overall, being in educational ministry is a great way to bless and support families and young children.