

# Case Studies of Early Learning Center Challenges

Review & Analysis

Recommendations from Barna Group  
produced for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
& Evangelical Lutheran Education Association

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# About These Case Studies

The Evangelical Lutheran Education Association (ELEA) serves as the office for schools for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and as a membership organization for school and center ministries of ELCA congregations. Membership is institutional, and the ELEA provides Lutheran education leaders with a community through communication, professional development, faith formation and professional resources.

**These case studies call attention to some of the ways ELCA churches and ELEA preschools and early learning centers are struggling in their relationship with each other.** The themes and recommendations in this resource provide in-depth decision-making knowledge and advice for ELEA and ELCA leadership teams on these matters.

## From these case studies, we will:

- Identify common challenges between ELCA churches and early learning centers
- Discuss key issues that the ELCA and ELEA need to work to resolve with their early learning centers
- Explore why some early learning centers have closed or are seriously considering closing
- Identify ways to strengthen church and early learning center relationships

# Methodology

In April and May of 2024, Barna fielded inductive interviews with ELCA pastors, key staff and stakeholders of churches with early learning centers and membership† ELEA school directors. The institutions represented in these interviews were recommended to Barna by the ELEA based on their performance and/or reputation within the ELCA as being institutions facing challenges\*.

\* **Churches and early learning centers facing challenges** were identified and selected by the ELEA for having some strain or unhealth in the relationship between the church and early learning center and/or within the early learning center itself.

† The schools included in this study are all present or recent past ELEA members. Membership is a tool to equip schools and congregations to connect to and develop best practices and guidance. It is a professional association.

# Methodology

Barna conducted 10 individual interviews (60 minutes each) via Zoom with ELCA school directors, staff and parents (3) and their corresponding ELCA church pastors and administrators (7). In these interviews, Barna covered the following:

1. **Intro:** General information about the pastor / school director and their current ministry / role
2. **Church:** A broad view of the church, including its history and current composition
3. **School:** A broad view of the school, including its history, staff, educational practices and composition
4. **Church & Community:** How the church engages with the local community and responds to needs and opportunities
5. **Church & School:** How the church is perceived by and interacts with affiliated schools and staff; hopes around education and schools

*For profiles of each school and church included in this study, see the [Appendix](#).*

# Key Themes

Insights from Conversations with  
ELCA school and church leaders

Where is there strain within ELCA  
church and early learning center  
relationships?

# Key Themes

## 1. Church and Preschool Membership

*Preschool staff and families are not often involved in the church*

## 2. Family Needs

*Offering preschools that support the community's scheduling needs*

## 3. Financial Responsibility of the Church

*Financial and budgeting stress placed on the church*

## 4. Contradictory Opinions and Beliefs

*Political differences and opinions between church and school families and the community*

# 1

## Church and Preschool Membership

*Preschool staff and families are not often involved in the church*




## Church and Preschool Membership

Interviewed pastors and preschool staff shared that very few, if any, preschool staff members are involved with the church with whom the preschool is affiliated. All of the preschools interviewed had less than half of their staff members attending the church, and some had no staff members attending the church.


It was also expressed that many families attending these preschools are rarely involved with 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 / strategy for preschool families altogether.

Preschool staff and families not attending the church is often perceived as a lack of respect and appreciation for the church, which seems to deepen a divide between the church and preschool. Many of these preschools are wholly acting as separate entities from the churches, creating a strained relationship between the two.

## In Their Words




“I definitely desire from myself as the administrator of the school to cultivate the enrollment in the membership of the congregation as much as possible. So I’m always willing to give or willing to partake in ministries that will combine our efforts - like food drives or coat drives and things of that nature, but it can get difficult sometimes because, while we’re all working towards the same goal, we still have different horizons that we’re looking at or different congregants that we’re serving. So sometimes that produces its challenges.”—*ELCA preschool director*




“A small number from the preschool attend the church. That is one of those areas that is a ministry for the preschool, but despite some strong efforts to create good connections, we haven’t had much of a pipeline for preschool into the church. Probably about one family per year [attend the church].”  
—*ELCA pastor*

## In Their Words



“It is definitely an older congregation. Also, I don’t feel a homey welcoming sensation when I walk into that church like a church should be. The school is thriving and the church isn’t, and I hate to see that, but I think that has a lot to do with it [tension between the two].” — *ELCA parent*



“So there is a relatively small number of people who are affiliated with both the preschool and the church. However, our church has for a long time seen this as a service to the community. The fact that it is offering a faith-based preschool for families in the community that is going to benefit them. And people like seeing the energy and that there are young people running around the building.” — *ELCA pastor*

# Insights-to-Action Recommendations

Encouraging both early learning staff members and families to be a part of the church - even in small ways - will show the preschool's support for the church. Furthermore, encouraging the church to affirm their support of the early learning center on a regular basis will create a more symbiotic relationship between the two.

## Action:

- Require employees to report at least one “touch point” with the church per semester by attending a service, activity or event.
- When possible, hire teachers that are already members of the associated church to bridge the church and preschool relationship. Systematize actively seeking out and recruiting new teachers from the church on an ongoing basis.
- Find and target recruitment pools of potential teachers who may be interested in attending a LGBTQIA+ affirming church.
- Encourage the church to promote at least two “easy onboarding” events to preschool families per semester, inviting them to participate in church life without applying pressure to attend church services on Sundays. Examples might be Easter egg hunts, walk-through-Bethlehem experiences at Christmas time, etc. Ensure the preschool properly partners and promotes key events as well to make these joint, symbiotic efforts.
- Provide a roadmap to success for senior pastors to affirm their relational bond with the preschool. Staff members will feel more inclined to be a part of a church that is actively pursuing and loving them. As an example, have the senior pastor do one thoughtful thing per month throughout the school year (set out donuts, hand-written notes, etc.).
- Communicate to the congregation the importance of the ministry of the preschool, and verbally express the support of the preschool from the pulpit to build symbiotic culture. Invite preschool teachers to share testimonies in the pulpit. Also share testimonies of families that have been impacted spiritually by the preschool.



# 2

## Family Needs

*Offering preschools that support the community's scheduling needs*


## Family Needs

Though some families appreciate the flexibility of the part-time preschool option, a growing number of families need full-day preschools for their children; this is simply not a service many ELCA early learning centers are providing. For many families serviced by these early learning centers, both parents are working full-time jobs, creating a need for full-day childcare.


As another dilemma, full-day childcare provided by the ELCA is or would need to be offered at a much higher price than part-time. Multiple directors shared how their local school districts are now offering free, full-day preschool options. Many hypothesize this has sparked decreased enrollment for their preschools as parents' needs are being met with the free public full-day preschool option.



## In Their Words




“This is a part-time preschool, and the maximum a student can be there would be from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; so this typically serves families who either have one parent who is able to drive or who have grandparents that are able to bring the child...We have a vibrant children’s ministry, but the preschool does not meet the daycare needs of most of those families, because both parents are working outside of the home.”—*ELCA pastor*



“There are at least a handful of kids [that are members of the church], but because we are just a [part-time] preschool, a lot of parents in the church need full-time daycare. And we [the church] also draw in a lot of families from surrounding communities as well, so a lot of times they did their preschool in their home community.”—*ELCA youth pastor & preschool teacher*

## In Their Words



“More families have two working parents, and we don’t provide the full-day care nor do we have the space in our current facility to be able to provide that. In our state, the school districts now offer Pre K programs that are on a sliding scale as well as offering that full-day option. Those programs that we hear about have waiting lists, and we are struggling to get to the capacity that we need.” –ELCA *pastor*



# Insights-to-Action Recommendations

Providing multiple preschool scheduling options for the families in the community could increase enrollment and financial stability.

## Action:

- Deploy a short survey to parents within each early learning center to gauge whether the school's offerings are effectively meeting their scheduling needs.
- Also, analyze the childcare and employment trends in the immediate community to predict if there will be shifts in childcare needs in the next few years.
- Creatively consider ways to offer full-day preschool. While this will involve additional staff and financial burden, do not be quick to write-off this option as a viable one, as [trends](#) show full-day preschool to be increasingly critical for Millennial parents. At the very least, explore offering extended care options.
- Make your childcare options appealing to mothers early on. Consider offering a mother's-day-out program for infants and young toddlers.
- Revisit all marketing material knowing free, public options are increasingly becoming available. Why is it best for a parent to pay more / make more of a financial sacrifice to send their child to YOUR school? What do you offer that they don't offer? Make this your recruitment campaign.

# 3

## Financial Responsibility of the Church


*Financial and budgeting stress placed on the church*

## Financial Responsibility of the Church


For almost all of the interviewed institutions, the preschool's budget falls within the budget of the church. Nearly all pastors, church administration and preschool directors shared how the financial configuration causes stress in the relationship between the preschool and the church.

Two preschools had previous directors that mishandled finances, causing the preschool to be in debt or need to close. Also, many of the preschools experienced a decline in enrollment during COVID-19 and have not seen the numbers return to what they were in previous years. In both of these difficult financial situations (mishandling of finances + Covid's effect), the church is forced to take on the financial burden. It seems that the financial relationship is causing the church staff and members to feel a sense of resentment towards the preschool - especially when taking on debt is involved.

## In Their Words




“This [preschool] has not been able to be financially sustainable, so we are in a process of determining whether the preschool will be viable to reopen in the fall. It will need to meet the enrollment thresholds that will be able to fully support the staffing costs. That will be quite a leap in enrollment from what it has been.” –ELCA pastor




“Because of declining enrollment, the preschool has gotten in a pretty difficult financial position over the past four years or so. In a typical year, it would be in the red by like \$5-10,000, and the church’s response in the past few years had been to subsidize the preschool but not to try and take over management or things like that, but to try and help get through a difficult time coming out of Covid. And when it became clear that we either needed to have a big shake up to change things and bring enrollment back, we needed to look toward closing.” –ELCA pastor

## In Their Words




“Our preschool director embezzled. Teachers lost their jobs, families were upset and didn't understand why we had to close. I don't ever want to go through that again, and it totally took our focus away from what we were there for. One person could destroy so many lives. We [the church] lost the preschool's income because they gave us a monthly income, and that put a strain on the church.”—*ELCA church admin*




“The congregation took on a substantial amount of debt in order to fund capital campaigns in order to expand the school. When I left, that debt was five or six times of what the church's annual budget was, and that created a sense of pressure among leaders of the church - that we were in deep water and needed to be very careful financially. It also created some resentment toward the school ministry.” —*ELCA previous pastor*

## In Their Words



“The preschool felt like we [the church] weren’t supportive enough. From director to director, they all had different ideas of what the church should be doing - what our role and their roles were. That varied with whoever we had in charge - the director. We weren’t able to pay them that much; there was a push of how to get raises. So money was always kind of a touchy point.” –*ELCA church admin*



“The church did a significant renovation project, a 1.6 million dollar project. Primarily because the building had been so far out of code that the church and school were either forced to do this project or close the school, and to their credit, they decided to do the project. There were a number of people even until 15 years after this project that still harbored ill will towards the school because of a perception that they were the cause for the ongoing debt burden that the church kept because of that renovation project.” –*ELCA previous pastor*

# Insights-to-Action Recommendations

Creating a cohesive environment where strong and beneficial communication between the church and preschool regarding budgeting and finances takes place.

## Action:

- Many churches stated that there is a separate preschool board and church board. Consider creating a third, smaller, unified preschool and church financial board to help guide cross-institutional decisions and create more cohesive financial plans. At the very least, assign a finances liaison for each board to communicate with the other, writing a clear job description and upholding clear expectations regarding financial communications in particular.
- With the preschool's budget usually under the church, offer accountability structure recommendations from the ELEA, promoting transparency from both sides to help ensure healthy financial responsibility.
- Offer ELEA resources and aid for maintaining healthy financial relations - for a variety of financial structures but most importantly for when a preschool budget is embedded within a church's. Ideally, this would be a service provided to schools and churches by a professional employed by the ELEA or ELCA.
- When there is problematic tension between an early learning center and their associated church, evaluate the financial decision-making processes of the school. The research shows that finances are likely triggering the tensions.

## 4

# Contradictory Opinions and Beliefs

*Political differences and opinions between church and school families and the community*



## Contradictory Opinions and Beliefs


A few of the interviewed churches and preschools explained how they tend to have different beliefs and opinions on a multitude of topics and don't navigate those waters well. The most prominent struggle mentioned was when the church's pastor is very supportive of the LGBTQ+ community and the preschool's families do not have similar opinions.

As another example, during COVID-19, many pastors conveyed how church members, church staff, preschool staff and preschool families all had different opinions on how to handle the health and safety of the preschool and church. These relationships haven't yet fully recovered. As a third example, one pastor shared how the church and preschool had different opinions on how to keep the children safe while in school.


Not only are these kinds of differing views affecting the church and school relationship, but the relationship with the community is also impacted as the church's reputation for strife with families increases.



## In Their Words




“Political division is a big challenge for us. Our preschool during Covid chose to follow requirements from our county health department. Our preschool was among many organizations that [a local facebook group] called lots of nasty names, “they are so pro mask, so pro vaccine.” And our denomination has churches that do outreach to the LGBT community, and it’s not an emphasis of our church, but they took statements from other churches of the same denomination and applied them to our preschool... It was a challenge within our community.” –*ELCA pastor*




“The [relationship with] preschool board has been the only challenge in this role... We have come to an impasse in believing what is best in the safety of our young people and teachers. The board tends to believe bad stuff doesn’t happen here. So that has changed my role a lot. I don’t really know what is going on with them, and I try to keep my hands off as much as possible because we disagree.” –*ELCA pastor*

## In Their Words



“When everything started going rocky was when the pastor that was there put up a pride flag on his office door. The parents started asking questions about it...And a lot of the parents didn’t agree with it. It got to the point where that's when the ELCA got involved because there were parents putting in complaints against the way he was operating.” –ELCA parent



“The last year of my time there was really overshadowed by LGBTQ inclusion, and there was a really serious disconnect between the church’s values and the school’s values, and there are some systemic reasons why that was kind of allowed to develop in the way that it was. But ultimately the school and the church were in pretty radically different places between LGBTQ inclusion, and we couldn’t find a way to reconcile that difference.” –ELCA previous pastor

# Insights-to-Action Recommendations

Learning to welcome and even encourage different beliefs and opinions between the church and preschool while making sure that vision, mission and values are shared.

## Action:

- Facilitate open discussion with the church's senior pastor to understand his/her preferences on belief alignment with the preschool's families, and discuss the best path forward to promote peace and prosperity. In particular, is there an expectation that the preschool needs to adhere to the beliefs of the church's leadership? As an alternative solution, facilitate this conversation between the church's board and the preschool's board.
- Conduct a series of interviews with preschool board members to gauge whether there is tension felt by the preschool families regarding mission, vision and values alignment with the church. Also gauge if there are any matters that are currently reducing families' trust in or comfort with the institution. As an alternative solution, facilitate this conversation with a few key teachers or "room moms."
- Determine whether LGBTQIA+ affirmation and inclusion is a core element of shared vision, mission and values for the preschool and church. If it is, then form a strategy for how to attract and serve preschool families who may not be aligned. Write a formal statement or roadmap for how to handle disagreement on this hot-button topic so all staff feels equipped to do so.

# Takeaways for Pastors and School Staff



# What Pastors Need to Know

How case studies can inspire & equip ELCA pastors to commit to the success of early childhood centers through support, involvement & shared values

# Tools for Pastors: Serving School Leaders

- Actively collaborate and participate with the school director in regard to finances, educational ministry decisions and supporting the families of the preschool and the community. A posture of support and enthusiasm will go a long way.
- Regularly participate in school programs, showing commitment and solidarity in the success of the school as well as the well-being of student, parent and caregiver relationships. Make your presence visible and obvious.
- Find a healthy way to promote an inclusive, welcoming and grateful environment in the church for the preschool staff. Find ways to honor them during services, infuse them into what you're already doing in an honoring way, etc.
- Personally appreciate preschool staff on a regular basis through activities, gifts and actions.

# Tools for Pastors: Serving Families

- Be collaborative with the preschool in providing parenting events and services that give parents and caregivers helpful resources, showing you care about their success and well-being even if they don't attend your church.
- Ensure parents perceive you as being an active presence in the life of the school by speaking at chapel services, being present at drop-off and pick-up for special occasions and attending and participating in preschool-sponsored events.
- Innovate events designed to engage families that are not church members and/or do not have a church home, inviting preschool families to participate far in advance. Plan an optional pathway for deeper church engagement coming out of every event for preschool families (i.e. provide a next step).
- Carefully and mindfully tend to your preschool's values and mission, knowing many families may have different beliefs than the ELCA.



# What School and Center Leaders Need to Know

How these case studies can demonstrate successful partnerships within ELCA churches and schools to best serve families and children

# Tools for Leaders: Serving Pastors

- Be transparent with pastors regarding the needs of the school and how the church can spiritually and practically support the school and its families as well as financially. Fight against the urge to operate like an independent entity only relying on the church for monetary aid.
- Work with the pastor to write a shared mission, vision and values for the church and preschool relationship. In this work, bravely communicate any points of tension felt by preschool families.
- Elevate and integrate the pastor's perspective into the work you're doing. Encourage their participation in school programming to bring a more visibility to your partnership. Be aware of the church's ministry rhythms, considering them as you write your own content calendar.
- Commit to the wellness of the school by committing to its healthy relationship with the church, understanding that a strong partnership will help you succeed and will improve your reputation in the community.

# Appendix

## Barna's Insights-to-Action Method Church & School Profiles



# Using These Case Studies for Improvement

With decades of research and partnership in mind, Barna has crafted a framework designed to help the Church see problems clearly, process those problems and, ultimately, respond with practical solutions. This is Barna's own **insights-to-action framework**.

Use this tactic to help your organization think critically and practically about the research. The insights-to-action framework answers the following questions during conversations regarding future growth and improvement: *What problems do we see? What problems do we need to solve? How could we solve these problems?*

With proper perspective, data can inform and transform your work, as well as help innovate and inspire fresh ways of doing ministry. Together, let's create change, moving schools and churches from insights to action.



# Barna's Insights-to-Action Framework

## 1. **Observe & Learn**

See clearly with data-informed insights. Identify and frame the problems that need to be solved.

## 2. **Interpret & Understand**

Analyze insights and evaluate problems. Move toward understanding how problems can become possibilities.

## 3. **Imagine & Solve**

Brainstorm solutions to key problems. Consider how one might turn various scenarios into solutions.

## 4. **Apply & Execute**

Turn solutions into actionable prototypes. Test ministry ideas and ultimately create future ministry strategies and programs.

# St. Michael Lutheran Church & Preschool

Virginia Beach, Virginia

**Pastor:** Barbara Bartling

**School director:** N/A

**School staff (before closing):** 10

**School age:** 23

# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & Little Sheep Learning Center

Bastrop, Texas

**Pastor:** Sharolyn Browning

**School director:** Alysa Johnson

**School staff:** 33

**School age:** 23

# Trinity Lutheran Church & Preschool

Olney, Illinois

**Pastor:** Kathi Boland

**School director:** Brooke Wheeler

**School staff:** 3

**School age:** 19



# St. James Lutheran Church & Preschool

Verona, Wisconsin

**Pastor:** Peter Narum

**School director:** Heather Pearl

**School staff:** 6

**School age:** 19

# Trinity Lutheran Church & Preschool

Enumclaw, Washington

**Pastor:** Eric Wooldridge

**School director:** Carry Schmitt

**School staff:** 3

**School age:** 45

# Our Saviour's Lutheran Church & Preschool

East Bethel, Minnesota

**Pastor:** Kiri Soldberg

**School director:** Lissa Leebens

**School staff:** 3

**School age:** 14

# St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Lutherville, Maryland

**Pastor:** Ed Kay (previous)

**School director:** Noel Alexander

**School staff:** 14

**School age:** 72

