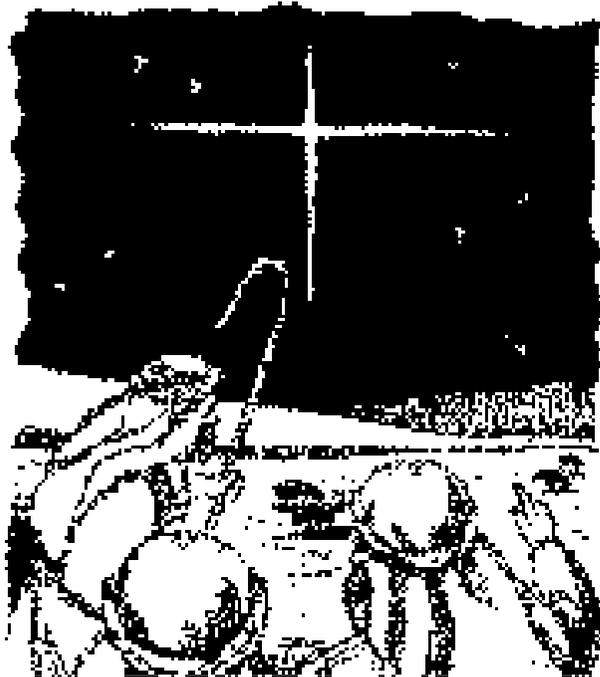


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The Lutheran Educator



The WELS Education Journal



**THE FIRST
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The Lutheran Educator



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of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
edited by faculty of Martin Luther College

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ARTICLES

No Vacancy 36
John R. Schultz

Attending a Professional Conference 38
Dr. Alan Spurgin

Luther's Lesser Known Theses 40
Mark Lenz

Parents and Teachers: Learning to Communicate and Work Together 45
Janet Fredrich

Responding to Why Youth Leave WELS 51
Joel Nelson

Experiential Learning—Enhancing the Future of Education in our Schools. 60
Luke Hartzell

DEPARTMENTS

As We See It 35
E.T.—The Extra-Textual



E.T. – The Extra-Textual

A fun, flimsy fantasy on our family's bookshelf bears the title, *Goodnight Opus* (Little, Brown & Co., 1993). Fans of the comic strips Bloom County, Outland or Opus would recognize the penguin protagonist and the author/illustrator, Berkeley Breathed. The story begins:

"Which book, dear Opus, may I read you tonight?"
asked Grandma with love at the start of that night.
"Why, my favorite," I said, "the one with the rhymes,
the same one you've read me two hundred nine times." ...
Then she sat and said, "Hush," and her voice filled the room.
"Good night," she read softly,
good night to the moon. ...
Good night to the floor, goodnight to the walls,
good night to the rug and the door and the halls.
Good night tiny mouse and goodnight blue moonshine,
goodnight!" Grandma read, the two hundred tenth time.
But then ...

I can't really say how this happened next:
After two hundred ten times,
I departed the text.

Opus proceeds to create a whole new adventure fresh out of his imagination. The moral of the fable is clear: Imagination is wonderful and should be encouraged. Or, as Opus puts it, "Sometimes it's good that we look for a way to depart from our text and get carried away."

Sparkling students' imagination is a vital part of teaching—and not just during story time or literature. In subjects across the curriculum, "Sometimes it's good that we look for a way to depart from our text and get carried away."

My son came home ecstatic the other day after his first experience in 7th grade history. "Dad! Our new history teacher is awesome! She had one of the kids start reading the textbook, and while the kid was reading, the teacher pretended to fall asleep, and then she started snoring. When the reading was done, she 'woke up' and said, 'That wasn't history. That was boring.' Then she went back through everything on those two pages and told us all sorts of really cool stuff that the textbook didn't say." He and his classmates were inspired by a playful teacher who "departed the text."

As you take a break over the holidays and ponder your plans for a new semester come January, remember to think playfully, creatively, maybe even mischievously. Don't be afraid to leave the text on the desk while you soar with your students on flights of fancy, imagination and fun information. In doing so, you and they will discover a love of learning.

DDS



No Vacancy

John R. Schultz

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in hanging over his little heart that a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

Perhaps you've heard or read the story of a young crippled boy who really wanted to have a leading role in his school's Christmas play. He longed to be Joseph, but that part was given to a taller boy. He would have been pleased to be a wise man, but those parts were given to kids who had expensive bathrobes. He was even rejected as a shepherd because it was hard to imagine a shepherd on crutches. He got the one remaining part, the innkeeper. His little heart ached as he thought about having to reject the Christ-child with his one line, "There is no room for you." The school gym was packed when the night for the play arrived. The curtain was opened and the play began with Joseph's knock on the door of the inn. The crippled boy's moment had arrived and he could stand it no longer. He flung open the door of the inn and shouted at the top of his voice, "Come on in! I've been waiting for you." There would not be a NO VACANCY sign

Christmas.

It's not that the innkeeper felt ill will toward them. It's just that the crowd gathering for the census filled the inn first. But, in so doing, he had turned away the most important Guest he or the world would ever receive – the God-man himself. No vacancy. That sign still hangs over the hearts of many people today. Many reject Christ. Others crowd him out because their hearts are already filled with other guests. Others are so wrapped up with work, shopping, meetings to attend – the list goes on – that, often without intending to do so, there's a NO VACANCY sign hanging over their hearts.

The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord Romans 6:23b.

We take the NO VACANCY sign down when the Holy Spirit impresses on us the joy of realizing who the Christmas-Guest is. We see in that Child in the manger the gift of God. We rejoice in our hearts because of the eternal life given to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gift given to sin-laden man is not a toy which has "joy" today, but

stands in the corner unwanted tomorrow. This Gift is a joy forever.

As workers in the LORD'S kingdom your responsibility is making this Gift known. You really have a triple measure of joy as called workers. First, by the grace of God you have had the NO VACANCY sign removed from your own hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace. Second, you have been called by God's people to be the tools by which the Holy Spirit, through your ministry of the Word, removes the NO VACANCY sign from the hearts of many others. This is a double joy, for you are joyful in your own salvation, and also joyful in the salvation of those placed in your care. Third, these others, impressed with the joy of the gift of God in Christ Jesus, will

direct their lips to speak to still others in the days and years to come so the NO VACANCY sign may be removed from many hearts throughout the world. May the Holy Spirit, amid the hustle and bustle of this Christmas season, change our hearts so we can say, "Come in, Lord Jesus. I've been waiting for you."

Read some more: Philemon 7

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled
Within my heart, made clean and new,
A quiet chamber kept for you. Amen
CW Hymn 38:13

John R. Schultz served as principal/administrator of Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School. He is currently retired and living in New Ulm, Minnesota

All Are Vocal With His Name

The silent skies are full of speech
For who hath ears to hear;
The winds are whispering each to each,
The moon is calling to the beach,
And stars their sacred wisdom teach
Of faith and love and fear.

But once the sky the silence broke
And song o'erflowed the earth;
The midnight air with glory shook,
And angels mortal language spoke,
When God our human nature took
In Christ, the Savior's birth.

And Christmas once is Christmas still;
The gates through which he came,
And forests' wild and murmuring rill,
And fruitful field and breezy hill,
And all that else the wide world fill
Are vocal with his name.

Shall we not listen while they sing
This latest Christmas morn;
And music hear in everything,
And faithful lives in tribute bring
To the great song which greets the King,
Who comes when Christ is born?

Philips Brooks

Attending a Professional Conference

Dr. Alan Spurgin

YOU GET THE FLIERS in the mail or see a page in a professional magazine. The “such and such” organization is holding their annual conference or a division of “such and such” is holding a conference on a topic that piques your interest. However, you think, not me! Those things cost a lot of money. I can not take time off from school to attend a conference. Who will I get for a substitute? Yet, you keep the flier on your desk until the conference has passed and you throw it away with a sigh. Next time you will do something.

That time is now.

Attending a professional conference is a great experience. It is a step to enhance your academic career. Conferences in the various disciplines as well as special education are held in many locales all over the United States (even the entire world). The conferences of the national organizations are usually held in the larger cities with convention centers, yet smaller conferences are available in less populated regions. You may be able to find a great conference at St. Cloud, Minnesota, Ripon, Wisconsin, or Lake Mary, Florida. Step outside your comfort zone and take a

risk by attending a professional conference.

When you arrive at a professional conference, you may be overwhelmed with registration, payment, special events or field trips, and navigating the convention center itself. With a little patience and determination, you will find yourself plotting a route to get through the maze of rooms and places to see. You will also be able to see the vendors that accompany a major conference. The book companies, special interest groups, and even school districts looking for employees set up shop at the conventions (Sylwester, 2005). It is fun to browse through and pick up the greatest “freebies” in the world. I always found enough free items to give each child in the classroom something from the convention. It was also a time to replenish the supply of catalogues and fliers with the latest editions and supplemental educational materials. Finally, it is really wonderful to get together with people who attend the conventions. You may be able to re-connect with colleagues who helped you further your education or meet new people who are on the cutting edge of research in the convention topic.

I know I have found attending conventions very rewarding. I look for presentations, field trips, or materials that enhance my continuing education. I am also uplifted because of the quality of speakers or resources. I see many of the same people at conventions, and it is fun to keep up a professional friendship with a person from Alaska (for example). In fact, informal contacts can be especially interesting and stimulating. Topics of discussion at evening meals or waiting for a session to begin are often as valuable as the topic of the session itself (Sylwester, 2005). In addition, I have a chance to visit with people who are experts in the field. At a convention, everyone is open and willing to talk about children or their personal/professional project.

Often at conventions I have the opportunity to broaden my vistas. I always find presentations where I know very little and thus my own horizons are expanded. I also find presentations that confirm some of my current teaching practices. It is great to find out that others have the same questions, fears, and anxiety that I have concerning children. At many conventions, field trips to show models of what is going on in education today are provided. These field trips are wonderful, eye-opening learning experiences and confirm or enhance what you are already doing in your classroom.

I have had the privilege to attend the Council for Exceptional Children's national convention nearly every year for the last ten years. Martin Luther College has been both encouraging and supportive of attending professional

conferences. I have been at conventions in Orlando, Florida; Baltimore, Maryland; Kansas City, Missouri; Vancouver, British Columbia; and Salt Lake City, Utah; to name a few. Each and every time I had a great time and learned much. I will be going back to Salt Lake City this year, a place where I had the privilege to present my research in 1998. I look forward to the mountains, the Great Salt Lake, and most importantly the convention itself. I am sure I will have a great time and learn much. You should give it a try, too. ♡

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Alan Sprugin teaches at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN.

These field trips are wonderful, eye-opening learning experiences and confirm or enhance what you are already doing in your classroom.

Luther's Lesser Known Theses

Mark Lenz

LESS THAN A YEAR after posting the 95 Theses in Wittenberg, Luther wrote and presented another less well-known set of theses known as the Heidelberg Theses. Their content and purpose were somewhat different from the more famous theses of 1517.

When handed a copy of Luther's 95 Theses, Pope Leo reportedly had said, "Luther is a drunken German. He will feel differently when he is sober." Perhaps it was just an offhand comment intended to make light of the matter, but Leo's subsequent actions reveal his serious concerns about Luther. Here was a monk who could spell trouble for the church if not stopped. Indulgences had raised large amounts of money for the church. The church's power and authority in Germany, though resented by many, had suffered no serious challenges. So Pope Leo sought quietly to find a way to silence Luther. He appointed a new general of the Augustinian Order, of which Luther was a member, to quench Luther and "thus smother the fire before it should become a conflagration."

The first opportunity came in May of 1518 at the regular meeting of the Augustinian chapter to be held in

Heidelberg. At that meeting Luther was scheduled to defend publicly the theology of the father of the order, St. Augustine, concerning his teaching on original sin. For Luther it became an opportunity to share his own thoughts on the theology of the cross.

As early as 1514, Luther had come to realize that humility is necessary for justification. At that time Luther believed man had the ability to make himself humble before God. A year later, however, Luther came to realize that this humility itself is a gracious work of God in man. God humbles man, Luther said, by his wrath, by the threat of eternal damnation, and by creating in man a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. It is through his wrath, Luther wrote, that God's mercy is able to operate. This "alien work" of God has a merciful intention. God makes a person a sinner in order to make him righteous. When a man is totally humbled, then, and only then, he finds righteousness in the cross of Christ.

In the years before Heidelberg, Luther had also come to realize that this righteousness of God revealed in the cross of Christ is a hidden revelation because only the eyes of faith can dis-

cern it. Luther came to realize further that nothing about God can be understood except at the cross. The cross, Luther believed, forces man to forsake his natural preconceptions about God and understand God only in lowliness and suffering.

Luther did not reject what the Bible teaches about the natural knowledge of God. This he readily conceded, but he said that this knowledge is limited, and that if a theology were based on this natural knowledge it would be idolatry. Luther said it is one thing for people to be aware of God's attributes, but quite another to understand God's intentions for mankind. This is something that can only be understood by faith. Luther saw the natural knowledge of God as merely a point of contact for the revelation that comes from God in the cross of Christ.

Luther spoke about God being hidden in the cross in two ways. First, God is hidden *in* his revelation. In the cross God's strength is revealed in apparent weakness. Both the hidden God and the revealed God are found in the same event of revelation. At the cross, the wrath of God over sin is revealed, but to faith, God's mercy is revealed at the same time. Only faith can perceive the real situation. Secondly, Luther spoke of the God who is hidden *behind* his revelation. He meant that there are certain aspects of God that will always remain hidden. Luther was determined not to focus on these things but rather always to concentrate on the way in which God has revealed himself in the death of Christ on the cross.

For Luther the theology of the cross was a theology of faith alone. He firmly believed that it is only through faith that the true significance of the cross is understood, and that it is only through faith that the power of the cross comes to a person. The unbeliever sees only an abandoned man dying on a cross. The believer sees in the cross the presence and activity of the hidden God.

At Heidelberg in 1518, Luther had the opportunity to state publicly what he had been thinking about for several years. In Theses 19 and 20 he said, "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1.20]. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."

Various aspects of Luther's theology of the cross are evident in these theses. The theology of the cross is a theology of revelation as opposed to a theology of speculation. God really does reveal himself in the cross of Christ, but only the eyes of faith can see him. God is not found in the visible things of this world, in the morality of man, or in the natural knowledge of God. God makes himself known only through suffering and the cross.

In the Heidelberg Theses Luther said that human suffering represents the alien work of God through which he accomplishes his proper work. Luther claimed that far from regarding suffering as a horrible intrusion in this world,

the theologian of the cross can think of it as precious treasure because revealed and yet hidden in suffering is the living God who is working out the salvation of those he loves. For Luther the cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian belong together because in the cross of Christ the relationship between God and man has become evident. For Luther, suffering, consequently, gains a special significance. The theologian of the cross does not flee from it, as does the theologian of glory, but he regards it as a special treasure.

So for Luther, the cross was not only the subject of theology but also the distinctive mark of all theology. The theology of the cross was for Luther not just something to discuss under the topic of the vicarious atonement but it was the integrating element for all Christian knowledge. The cross was not just a chapter in the study of theology but it was a specific kind of theology. It was the point of reference for every doctrinal topic imaginable. Luther believed that the cross of Christ is the key to understanding the Bible, that where the theology of the cross is not understood, the Bible remains a closed book.

Luther believed that the theology of glory in contenting itself with the ethical works of man and the works of God in creation had lost sight of God. Luther fought against such moralizing and rationalizing for they represented the fruitless desire for a direct communion with God. Luther believed that God has chosen not to be known in his invisible things but only in what he has said about himself in suffering and the

cross. Nevertheless, even this revelation of God, Luther believed, is only an indirect revelation, something like Moses seeing the back parts of God.

Luther had every reason to fear going to Heidelberg in 1518. His enemies had boasted he would be burned at the stake. Some warned he might be assassinated along the way. As a precaution Luther disguised himself and traveled by foot rather than in a wagon. To his surprise, he was received at Heidelberg as a guest of honor. The older men at the meeting shook their heads at what he said, but the younger men were enthusiastic. A couple of men even joined the cause of the reformation. God obviously blessed Luther's proclamation of the theology of the cross. He will bless our proclamation of it too. ✪

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cross was not only
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Professionalism

Andrew Willems

ONE DAY THIS past summer, I was driving to a follow-up doctor's appointment at Children's Hospital in Milwaukee. My son had a condition that was being monitored. While it was not a life-threatening condition by any means, my entire family was confident and relieved that things were going in the right direction. I was thinking to myself how, with the Lord's blessing, everything was going well. I was thinking how thankful I was that our family practice doctor had recommended this course of action. I was thinking about how comforting it was for me to know that my son's health was in a professional's hands.

Ironically, it was a few days later that the sports news was filled with stories about Terrell Owens of the Philadelphia Eagles and his very unprofessional attitude with his teammates and coach. Sadly in today's society, professional athletes are not always the ideal professionals. So, what exactly is the meaning of professionalism? On the one hand, professionalism is characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession (Webster). On the other hand, professionalism meant being owed something for what you did, for who you are, and acting like a spoiled little child who knew better than everyone else.

Finally, I met our family practice doctor while strolling through a local store. He addressed me by name. He took

time out to come over to me and ask how everything was going. He was friendly, yet did not waste time with idle chit-chat. I can safely say this doctor is well-respected in our community, well-liked for his professional practice, and known for his pleasant nature. It is also well known that he holds God in high regard.

After putting these three situations all together, I asked this question, "How do parents and students in my classroom regard me?" As you will see, this one question has led not to a single answer, but to more questions. As I personally reflect on the following questions, I feel I am able to adjust my thinking toward an attitude that pleases Christ and allows me to become a more effective educator. It is my prayer that the following questions will guide the readers toward that end as well.

I realize that Jesus Christ has called me to be a Lutheran elementary teacher. I take the words of Christ, as he reinstated Peter, "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15), to be a direct calling to me, as well. Is everything I do feeding God's lambs? Do I enjoy being with students at recess to teach them how to apply God's Word in their everyday relationship with peers? Do I call parents when some behavior their child exhibited is of concern to me? Do I talk about fellow ministers of the gospel with warm regard? Do I apply law and gospel in my classes without screaming or without being condescending? If I answer, "NO!" to

even one of those questions, I believe I must refocus on my job of feeding God's lambs.

As a redeemed child of God, my mission as a Christian educator follows the words of I Corinthians 10:31: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God." Do I caution students against coarse language, and then use the same with fellow called workers? Do I model Christian love and patience to my students? Do I forgive as Christ has forgiven me? Do I say, "Let me take the speck out of your eye when all the time there is a plank in my own eye?" (Matt. 7:4). Do I tell students and parents to practice home devotions, and then I do not practice them in my own home? If I answer, "NO!" to even one of these questions, I believe I must again be reminded to do everything to the glory of God.

As a professional educator, I have a personal mission statement (Willems). Some of my mission statement points are in the paragraphs above. Some of the other points in my personal mission statement deal with more secular views of the teaching profession (Canter).

First, I emphasize personal-professional goals. What will I learn during my own formal and informal study this year? What new educational practices will I add to my lessons to enhance them? Where are the weaknesses in my school and classroom curricula? These types of questions lead me to strive for excellence in teaching.

Second, I emphasize overcoming daily challenges. What is hindering a

certain child from excelling in my class? What can I do to be better prepared for this lesson next time? How will this skill or process prepare my students for the next level in their education? These types of questions lead me to see that each child is important to God, and should be important to me as an individual.

Third, I emphasize building a positive attitude. Have I complimented colleagues on their fine work lately? Did I genuinely encourage one student in my classroom today? Am I helping my students become self-disciplined? These types of questions lead me to believe that all students can use to God's glory the gifts he gave them.

Finally, I emphasize building relationships. Did I greet students warmly this morning when they entered my room? Do I seek out parents to start a conversation regarding a topic other than their child? Do I work cooperatively with the ministry team at my school and church? These types of questions remind me that the great commission is my personal mission as well. ♣

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Parents and Teachers:

Learning to Communicate and Work Together

Janet Fredrich

FEEL OUT OF TOUCH with your child's school life? What role should you play in your child's education? How much help is too much? Are we preparing our children for independence? Are our expectations real? These and other questions will be addressed as we learn how to communicate and work together with our child's educators.

Let us focus on what we as parents and educators need to know about each other and the education of our children.

Know that no one is the enemy

Parents want their children to learn and teachers want their classroom children to learn. Both are committed to helping children be successful. So, instead of working against one another, we need to try to be a unified front, working together to help the children know their potential and to know their abilities.

Know your child

As parents, we need to have age appropriate expectations of our children's

ability and behavior. Usually, as parents, we have a pretty good idea. Our children have been in our care for a number of years before they hit the school circuit, but sometimes our vision of their ability can be clouded by our own goals for them.

Know if your child is ready for school. Don't push! Some signs that he/she is ready is that he/she can communicate with adults other than the parents and be understood; that he/she can put on and take off coats/snow pants and boots/shoes and can go to the bathroom on his/her own; he/she can complete a task; he/she can listen to a story and answer questions about it; he/she can follow directions and take turns; and he/she can be willing to wait for a request to be met or a question to be answered.

Next, you need to know the learning style of your child. Is he/she an auditory learner, learning best by having things explained, or a visual learner where things must be seen to be understood, or a tactile learner where the instruction comes more from a hands-on method, or combinations of these styles? What about learning disabilities? Has your child been diagnosed with any

specific disorder or does it just take a longer time and more practice before the concept sinks in?

Once you know your child's specific style or needs that information should be passed on to the teacher so methods to accommodate specific needs might be implemented. Also, you as parents will need to accommodate the learning style when you help your child with homework. (Just a word of caution here—your child has specific needs, but remember that the other children in that same classroom have needs that are specific to them. The teacher cannot always meet each child's needs in every activity, so please be patient.)

Know your child's teacher(s)

Invite them to make a home visit to see your child in his home setting. Talk to them; share your appreciation; share your concerns. Go to the school events where you'll have opportunities to see them. Give them your e-mail address and ask for theirs. This relatively new communication device can clear up problems much more quickly. If you have a forgetful child, supply your child with a homework notebook or assignment book for him/her to record his/her assignments. You may also want to ask the teacher to e-mail what assignments were given each day. This message from the teacher is not to replace teaching your child the responsibility of recording his/her assignments. We do not want to enable our children to "get by" but rather to take charge of their

assignments. Your child does not need to know you have a communication from the teacher. This communication merely gives you a "heads up" on what questions to ask your child in order to find out what homework he/she might have that day, especially if your child is not as accurate as he/she thinks.

When you attend parent/teacher conferences (and please do!) have a list of questions ready and address them after the teacher has given you the basic information concerning the progress of your child. The following are questions that you might consider having on your list:

- What are the objectives my child is supposed to attain?
- Is my child performing at grade level in basic skills?
- How is my child performing in reading skills—in math skills?
- What sort of achievement or aptitude tests will my child get this year?
- What are my child's strengths or weaknesses in major subject areas?
- Do you have any samples of my child's work?
- Does my child need special help in any academic subject?
- Who are my child's friends and how does he/she interact with other students?
- Has my child attended class regularly? And on time?
- Have you noticed any changes in learning progress during the year?

You certainly do not need to ask all of these questions because time constraints of scheduled parent/teacher conferences will not allow for ample time to

answer. If you should have further questions, ask the teacher for a follow-up visit.

If there should be a problem and you are called in to meet with the teacher, keep in mind that the teacher is a professional who does want to help your child—who wants your child to succeed. The questions the teacher asks are not intended to be mean or nosy, but to have a clearer understanding of the child's home life, which does impact your child's well-being and academic performance.

You don't have to be right or wrong. Both of you are exploring what is missing in your child's ability to show progress and success, and how you both can help your child. The conference is not a personal attack. By summarizing the suggested course of action at the end of the conference, the teacher and parent will both know if they are being understood.

Should you disagree with the method the teacher uses to solve an existing problem, give the teacher the reasons you disagree in a calm manner. Then offer alternative solutions or ask the teacher to help you find some alternatives. Make an appointment for contact for a "follow up." Remember, the teacher usually has your child for only a year or two at most. That may or may not be enough time for the teacher to know your child inside and out. You are the parent. It is your duty to help the teacher understand your child and to support the teacher in the methods chosen to deal with your child. It is also your responsibility to guide your child in the

right path.

Know your child's school

Become involved in your child's school—be a room mother or father, driver for field trips, volunteer one afternoon a week to do things such as work with children and flash cards, listen to them read, work with them on spelling words, or run off papers for the teacher. Working with the teacher will give you a better understanding of the professional as well as the concepts being taught.

Know your place in the homework world

The homework belongs to your child—not to you! Teachers assign homework to their students for a variety of reasons:

- To review and practice what they've learned;
- To get ready for the next day's class;
- To learn to use resources, such as libraries, reference materials, and encyclopedias; and
- To explore subjects more fully than time permits in the classroom.

The above list gives a few of the main reasons for giving homework assignments.

How to prepare for the homework session

Provide—a regular time for doing homework every night in an area of the home where distractions are limited, supplies are close by, and the child may spread

out his/her materials, with easy access to you, the parent, if help is needed.

Do—Encourage good study habits and model a positive attitude toward learning and problem solving. Be there to assist with a word or two of explanation. Do whatever you can do to show your love of learning: read aloud to your child, take him/her to libraries, museums, or historical sites. Encourage your child to ask questions. Quiz your child before a test *if they ask you to do that* the teacher asks you to help with spelling words, vocabulary words, or oral reading, please do so. If an assignment seems too long or too large for your child, break it down into manageable sections. Have your child write dates due for long-range assignments on the family calendar. Teach your child to use an assignment book or planner. Showing them your “planner” may help them understand the value in this. Also encourage them to hang on to old quizzes and tests (chapter or unit) since they may be used to create chapter tests or unit tests or semester tests.

Praise your child when they have done a good job but don’t fake it; children are experts at knowing whether or not you are sincere. If they got something finished but you see they did a part wrong, try to start with a positive comment, then ask a question about the part in question, and if your child doesn’t catch on that it was done incorrectly, state your criticism in a positive manner.

If your child is confused about an assignment, ask: How far have you gotten on the assignment? Let’s try to fig-

ure out where you are having a problem. *or* Do you need to review your notes or reread a chapter in your textbook before you continue? *or* Are you still having problems? Maybe it would help to take a break or have a snack.

Do not—rob your child of the chance to practice problem/solving skills. Do not teach them dependence rather than independence. You cannot be there to do their high school homework, college homework, or work their future job for them. *Let them do it* Do not do the work for them. You may wish to check to see if the homework is complete but it may not be a good idea to correct their homework even if you know it is wrong. A phone call or e-mail to the teacher before or at the beginning of the next day may help the teacher have a “heads up” that some concept taught was not grasped.

Know the difference between a child who is frustrated and a child who is manipulating you

You may want to contact the teacher if your child refuses to do his/her assignments, even though you’ve tried hard to get him/her to do them; if the instructions are unclear; if you can’t seem to help your child get organized to finish assignments; if you can’t provide needed supplies or materials; if neither you nor your child can understand the purpose of the assignment; if the assignments are often too hard or too easy; if the frequency is uneven—such as Monday and Tuesday are light but Wednesday and Thursday are way too

heavy; if your child has missed school and needs to make up work. Usually a teacher can provide you with some suggestions to help. Make use of a homework hotline, if the school has one.

However, some children know how to “yank your chain.” If a child doesn’t want to do the homework, he/she can manufacture all kinds of distractions of his/her own in order not to complete the task. A few words of explanation to get them started are fine but they shouldn’t be asking questions every step of the way. Set goals for your child such as: “Let’s see if you can finish these two sentences (or problems) by the time I am done washing the glasses.” Encourage but don’t do!

Know how much homework is being required of your child

Children of different grade groups will have different homework requirements. For instance, early elementary age groups will need parents to help drill spelling words, memory work, or to listen to their child read (or to read to the child). This should not exceed 20 minutes a day. From 4th to 6th grades, small amounts of homework, gradually increased each year, may support improved academic achievement. This should be in the range of 20 to 40 minutes a day. In seventh grade and beyond, students who complete more homework score better on standardized tests and earn better grades, on the average, than students who do less homework. The average time for seventh through ninth grade is up to two

hours a day. For the grades beyond it could be even more.

- If there is too much, your child will become discouraged—it’s hard to climb a mountain every night.
- If there is too much, your child could have a learning problem that makes it difficult for assignments to get finished in the classroom setting.
- If there is too much, your child might not be making the best use of time in school—in other words, he/she might be fooling around or doing other things that interest them, only to leave their homework for “Mom and/or Dad.”
- If there is not enough, your child could become discouraged—it’s hard to grasp a concept if you don’t get enough practice.
- If there is not enough, your child might not be challenged.
- If there is not enough, and grades show lack of progress, your child could be rushing to finish.

Know, and impart at the proper time, methods for taking tests

This would be more helpful for older elementary school children—perhaps grades 5 – 8. Teaching them early that there is a strategy involved may help them to eliminate stress related behaviors such as anxiety attacks.

Know when to communicate with the teacher or school

Proactive is better than reactive

If there has been a change in your family or something has happened recently at school that is causing your child distress, call or e-mail the teacher first. See if there is another side to the story or be the first to inform the teacher rather than to let the teacher find out weeks later that Jimmy was unfocused because his pet dog died and he was having trouble coping with it. Jimmy may be way behind in the understanding of a vital concept by this time.

If you request a conference, please give the teacher a “heads up” on the topic so information may be collected ahead of time. Teacher time is important and you will want the conference to be beneficial for both you and the teacher.

In very rare cases, you might encounter a teacher who has limited or no interest in the success of your child as a student. When this occurs, it is your duty as a parent to take your evidence to the school principal. However, please do not bypass the classroom teacher going straight to the principal, without giving the teacher a chance to work out the problem with you and your child.

Developing a good working relationship with your child’s teacher will not necessarily guarantee that your child will be a good student, but it will help his/her chances.

Know where and how to get help

Parenting Classes can help. The U.S. Dept. of Education has on-line sources of information to help parents. Your school administrators and counselors

have a wealth of experience and help available for the asking.

Teachers, know your parents

For those of you, who are future (or current) educators, remember that, at times, parenting and teaching can both be highly criticized and thankless jobs. But both parents and teachers are interested in the same thing—the success of a child. Remember to work as a team! Begin your phone call, e-mail, or face-to-face conference with something positive to state about their child. Be direct but not accusatory when presenting any problem. Don’t make the parent feel like they’ve been summoned to the principal’s office because they did something wrong! Be prepared for parent/teacher conferences. Have some type of rubric set up by which each child can be measured. Remember not to become defensive if a parent is not in total agreement with your dealing with his/her child. None of us is perfect! They have lived with that child every day since birth and you are usually limited to nine months of one or two years in which to “get to know” him/her. Respect the parents and they will respect you. ❖

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(Ed. The preceding article is presented to our readers for use at church or school meetings.)

Responding to Why Youth Leave WELS

Joel Nelson

IN FALL 2005, Goodman Research released to WELS the results of a study on “Why Youth Leave WELS.” Such a study was requested by a 2003 Synod convention resolution, and subsequently commissioned by WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship (CYD). A full report of the study along with a concise summary have been made available on www.wels.net (jumpword: youthstudy). Some discussion about the study has already occurred among individuals within the synod. The Commission on Youth Discipleship hopes that further discussion might take place.

The Lutheran Educator asked WELS Youth Discipleship administrator Dr. Joel Nelson to share some thoughts regarding that study with the TLE’s readers, since Lutheran educators are intimately involved with youth discipleship in our congregations. The TLE interview was conducted by associate editor David Sellnow, who also serves as an advisory member of WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship.

TLE: The study, “Why Youth Leave WELS” was commissioned as a result of a 2003 Synod convention resolution which asked “that (WELS) Youth Discipleship research and publish a report on the extent of and reasons for teen and young adult losses in our church body.” Can you tell us anything about that resolution or the convention’s mood when asking for such a study?

JN: I was not at the 2003 Synod convention at which this resolution item was developed. The resolution item for which CYD was to comply was actually an insertion in Floor Committee #8’s larger Resolution No. 4. Resolution 4’s subject was, “Challenge 2010.” Challenge 2010 was an initiative developed by WELS Parish Schools to strengthen WELS schools in various ways by the year 2010. Resolution 4 deals with issues specific to WELS schools and Challenge 2010. I assume the issue of teen and young adult losses in WELS was part of the larger issue stated in Resolution 4: the decline in WELS schools’ enrollments. One wonders if the WELS schools’ enrollments were not down, would the resolution to study teen/young adult losses have even come

up?

TLE: The study as presented addresses possible reasons why youth may leave our churches, but does not offer any statistical information on actual losses. Explain why the 2003 convention's request for a "report on the extent" of youth losses could not be fulfilled by a short-term study.

JN: Many congregations have difficulty tracking their inactive adult members. Accurately tracking teen and young adult inactivity is an even tougher challenge in congregations. Accurately quantifying WELS teen/young adult losses by using congregational data would have been rough. I suppose some kind of number could have been reached, but I think there would have been several qualifiers and disclaimers needed to make any sense of it.

As CYD considered the convention resolution, the opinion of the resolution's floor committee chairman that the whole topic of studying teen/young adult losses was a rather last minute add-on, the absence of WELS Convention funds to underwrite any research, and the larger issue that the resolution spoke to: namely why are teens and young adults leaving, CYD moved in the direction it did. We felt learning the "reasons for/whys" would be a better use of precious human and financial resources than in finding out "the extent/how many" part. CYD felt that any teen/young adult losses are too many and that focusing on how to stop the losses would be the best way to go.

TLE: I've heard it said that a large percentage of confirmands fall away

from church after confirmation. Is this simply a general consensus or do we have some concrete evidence of this?

JN: I have not heard that WELS possesses any concrete data on confirmand attrition percentages. Certainly CYD does not have any numbers. But if we are honest with ourselves, we have known for decades that this is an issue. We don't need a research study to tell us that we lose a lot of confirmands fairly soon after confirmation. Every congregation has its "Wall of Shame," its confirmation pictures posted where large numbers of white robed youth are AWOL from worship and congregational life. Even in some of our seemingly healthier, more organized congregations, it's a big issue. But here again, counting the numbers will not lead to meaningful change.

TLE: Even though we don't have exact statistics on youth losses, we do have overall statistics on member losses. Parish Services administrator Bruce Becker documents those losses (which include both departures from our churches as well as deaths):

WELS reached its membership peak in 1990 – 421,396 members. At the end of 2005, we were at 398,282, a decline of over 23,000 members. From 2004 to 2005 the losses were exceptionally large. In the last year we experienced a decline of 1,089 communicant members and 1,487 children for a total loss of 2,576 members. We are a church denomination in decline, no matter how you slice the numbers ("Parish the Thought,"

Imprint – WELS Blog, August 27, 2006).

Given that information, would you say that loss of members is a pressing concern for our synod? What do you sense as trends as far as losses of teens and young adults?

JN: Here's a question for you: Were we really ever a synod of 421,396 members? If in any congregation 20-30% of the members (and that may be conservative) are somewhat inactive to totally inactive, would not that really be the same for "Mother WELS"? Now I don't mean to minimize the losses, but how much of it represents active people leaving, and how much of it consists of inactive people finally being cleared from churches' membership rosters? Are we a synod in decline, or are we a synod that's been in denial for too long?

TLE: Do you think it would be worthwhile for WELS to start tracking more statistical data concerning youth in the church (and youth leaving the church)? Or will that not really answer anything other than our own curiosity? Is getting active in ministry that involves youth more urgent than collecting statistics about youth?

JN: Nationally, we already know how many youth are reported to be in WELS. You take the number of "baptized members" and subtract the number of "communicant members" in any WELS Statistical Report. In 2004 it was 86,216. In 2005 it was 84,729. We know how many go to Lutheran elementary school, Sunday school, VBS, and Bible class. But the data gathering process used now does not really allow for any

additional questions. As I understand it, that's partly because we: a) "don't have room on the exiting form," and b) WELS statistical data providers do not want to take more time to respond to more questions.

Personally, I would be in favor of WELS gathering more detailed and meaningful data on youth beyond membership and enrollment numbers so that, at the national level, we could see issues and trends and then work to develop helpful resources for congregations. Also, if gathering data on a variety of issues/topics/trends would move local congregations to get to know their youth and families more, then it would be really worth it. Gathering various bits of data on children, teens, and young adults in our congregations would also serve as a symbolic gesture that says, "We care about you and want to know what you think and feel about this or that" especially if the questions are more qualitative in nature.

TLE: The Commission on Youth Discipleship (CYD) decided to use an outside consultant to conduct the study as to reasons why teens and young adults might leave our churches. Tell us about that decision.

JN: We did this for two reasons. First, when we made the decision to qualitatively research the "reasons for/why" part of the resolution, we knew we'd



have to address people who left WELS, asking why they did so. We believed, and I think correctly, that “leavers” (as we called them in the study) would be more willing to share their views if they knew that the surveyor was not from the church body they left. Secondly, we did not see a viable WELS individual or entity out there that had the professional experience and credibility to do the research for us. In Bret Goodman, we had a professional researcher with 30 years of experience. He had done a couple other research projects for WELS and NPH, so he knew WELS. He also was willing to work within the budget CYD approved for the research project.

TLE: Explain the approach that was taken by this study – surveying pastors and “leavers,” as well as conversation with a focus group.

JN: We surveyed the leavers because we wanted to get their honest views on why they left. I don’t see how we could have done a study on why youth leave WELS and not ask the leavers themselves. We asked the pastors because they are pivotal players in congregational ministry. They have a pretty good read on their members, and their perspective would provide another meaningful layer of insight into the phenomenon, as well as some balance of viewpoint. We also included them because we needed to have their help in passing on the survey information to leavers for whom they still had some kind of contact information. It would have been impossible for us to connect with leavers without going through the local congregation and its pastor.

Additionally, we felt pastors would participate better if they also had a chance to share their perceptions. The focus group served as the “third leg” of the data gathering. The focus group members reacted to the data gathered from the leavers and the pastors, as well as provided their own views. Leavers, pastors, and focus group provided the “triangulation” required by qualitative research. When similar themes emerge from all three groups, then you know you are on to something.

The pastoral participation in the study was rather disappointing. According to our records, 1,310 pastors successfully received the emailed invitation to participate and only 163 (12%) took the online survey for pastors. We did it via email to keep costs down, and to make it easier for pastors to forward study materials to leavers using the electronic files we attached. The files presented the study information as if it was coming from the researcher and not from any WELS congregation or individual. Doing it this way enabled us to distance the local congregation from the process, because we believed that if the leaver got mail from his/her former congregation, he/she would not participate. Ninety-one leavers took the online survey specifically designed for them, but we have no way of knowing how many leavers were sent the study information from their pastor/congregation. While we would have liked many more than 91 responses, that was enough to make the results meaningful.

TLE: Could you sum up general themes voiced by the pastors who partic-

ipated in the pastors' survey? Do they sense youth losses as a large or small problem? What factors do they consider most important?

JN: The researcher's synthesis of the pastoral comments brought these themes forward: 1) family background/influence, breakdown of home, poor parental modeling, 2) the increased freedom youth have (jobs/activities/college) take them away from church, 3) youth programs being an afterthought and youth feeling no sense of ownership in the church's ministry, 4) the confirmation/graduation syndrome, 5) influence of peers/culture.

Many would see what's happening today as nothing new. Youth have always left WELS, but we should still be concerned about it.

TLE: Did you notice any difference of perspective or disconnect between the responses from pastors and the responses from "leavers"? Do they mostly agree or somewhat disagree on the issues that are important for retaining young people's involvement in the church?

JN: I would say there is quite a bit of similarity. The youth, however, seemed to express the view that WELS adults in leadership as not really understanding them, and are being too critical, close-minded, and negative toward non-WELS people. They also feel that in the WELS adult's mind, youth don't count. Also, the youth in the study spoke about adjustments to WELS worship, about which the pastors were fairly silent.

TLE: I know one particular recommendation by the consultant has been met with strong reactions to your office

by some synod members. And members of CYD have noted their own objections concerning some parts of the recommendations. What have been the most controversial aspects of this study?

JN: First of all, the reactions that came to me or the CYD office about the study, since its release in November of 2005, have been very few. By my count of emails, phone calls, and blog posts, perhaps 25 people said anything. Of all those responses, several were positive and supportive. Of those more critical, some did not like that money was spent to do the study. Some did not like that a non-WELS researcher was involved. Some felt that the issue of youth losses was no news flash, and you only had to preach God's Word more. Some questioned the research methodology. Some misunderstood the recommendations, thinking that they were coming from CYD when they were really those of the researcher. WELS has 398,282 members according to the 2005 Statistical Report. That only 25 (.000063%) contacted the CYD office about them, does not spell controversy to me. In fact, it's disappointing. Now granted, there may be many people who have read the study and are talking about it in other venues, but I have not heard much buzz about the study, even after our press releases, *Forward in Christ* articles, CYD newsletter articles, district convention discussions, etc.

"Controversy" came, in my view, when some jumped to conclusions about one of the eleven research report's recommendations, specifically #7 which stated: "Both pastors and other adult leaders

need to exercise more flexibility and tolerance toward other denominations and women.” I think for some the word “tolerance” in relation to other denominations and women, got them so on edge that they did not bother to read the researcher’s explanatory notes on this recommendation nor any other areas of the report which provided nice clarity on the “tolerance” point. They also did not contact me or other CYD members to ask for clarity, and a better understanding of what CYD’s position on #7 really was. Though they should know and trust that WELS CYD was not going to promulgate false doctrine, they chose to think the worst. Their own sensitivities moved them to react pretty strongly, and that was kind of upsetting.

TLE: It would seem that even these controversial points are key issues in the minds of young people, so sweeping them under the rug is not the best response. How do you recommend we address controversial concerns of youth that were uncovered in this study?

JN: I think we first have to allow people, especially those whom we say we love like Jesus, to say what’s on their mind without assuming that they are

some hell-bent, church-destroying wing nut. Unless people have a chance to tell me what they are thinking and feeling, especially about the Bible and their faith struggles, I really don’t know what they “get” and don’t get. For young people, who are learning how to articulate their points of view and understand the role faith plays in the daily navigation of

life, they must be allowed and encouraged to say what’s on their minds. And I, as a leader of youth, need to listen patiently, guide gently, and watch humbly the amazing things God can work in their hearts.

As a teacher, trained in education, I am perhaps more comfortable with questions.

Questions help me to see what my students have learned and what I may need to re-teach. Questions provide great teachable moments, especially when it comes to God’s Word. We should not fear the dialog. In fact, we should welcome it and create more opportunities for it, for then we can dig into the Bible and mine more deeply and meaningfully what its message is for us.

With the study on why youth leave WELS, let’s use the results as a catalyst for reflection, discussion, evaluation, and improvement. Let’s use the study as



a way to better comprehend what may change, what must change, and what must not change.

TLE: Have you noticed a reluctance to talk about some of the opinions voiced by some of the youth? Do you think there were certain aspects of youth opinion that fall outside the bounds of acceptable discussion, or should we find a way to address all the concerns raised within this study?

JN: In addition to what I said in the previous answer, I believe there should be no topics that are taboo to discuss. Discussing life – all of its gloriousness and goriness – must be allowed. And I should not assume that your asking the questions means you are some standard being or second-class Christian for whom Jesus' atonement is not given.

TLE: When it comes to issues of fellowship, as well as the roles of man and woman, our Bible-based doctrine is not something we will change. But did you notice, in the examples offered by survey respondents, that many difficulties they had were not because someone had taught them doctrine appropriately, but rather due to inappropriate demeanor or responses they had experienced in their congregations?

JN: Yes. That 48% of the "leavers" went to another WELS church also affirms that, for many, it is not the doctrine that distresses them. One beautiful young lady, a participant in the focus group I observed as part of the larger study, was almost brought to tears as she readily admitted her spiritual struggling but then confessed to feeling so confused and hurt that her congregation

did not seek personal contact with her when she was drifting. Rather than reaching out to her and checking up on her, the congregation leaders sent her a cold letter, telling her in essence, "You aren't coming to church. Stop sinning, start coming, or we'll give you the boot." It did not surprise me that she did not give them the chance to boot her. She left on her own, for good.

TLE: As you've reported elsewhere (*Forward in Christ* January 2006), you viewed the focus group session through a two-way mirror. Would you like to comment again on your impression of the focus group in action?

JN: As I watched, I was blown away by what I saw and heard—12 young people, pouring out their hearts, admitting their shortcomings, demonstrating their faith, and not wanting radically to reconstruct WELS, but wanting it to be more responsive, more caring, more communicative, and more in touch. These young people were articulate, passionate, and concerned. They loved God, but wondered about WELS and their future in it.

TLE: I noticed that not all of the "leavers" chosen for the survey had in fact left WELS, but in some cases had joined other WELS congregations, in other cases were students away at college. Do you think some of the congregations who gave names of "leavers" misunderstood what was meant? Or, perhaps do congregations simply lose track of some people and think they have left?

JN: Yes and yes. I also think that if you don't have some regular, systematic

way of lovingly touching base with your young members and their families, you wind up making assumptions. Sure, there are tremendous things out there competing with the church and its influence on youth, but frequently their leaving the church says less about the youth and more about the church they left. At a time in your life when you are wondering about who you are, whether you matter, if you are worth anything, silence from the church and worse yet, open expression of disappointment, speaks volumes. Let's figure out better ways in our local settings to keep in touch, reach out, and support our struggling youth and their parents who are struggling, too. We need to partner with parents, tag-teaming with them to keep our youth connected.

TLE: The full report on "Why Youth Leave WELS," available on the Commission for Youth Discipleship website, is 112 pages long. Why should called workers (such as those reading *The Lutheran Educator*) invest the time necessary to read through the whole report?

JN: I think the report is interesting, especially the conclusions section, the final recommendations, and their explanations. Because most called workers have a ministry to youth in one form or another, they should want to know what the youth in this study felt because the youth they work with are probably feeling the same. Also, because called workers were youth once themselves, they

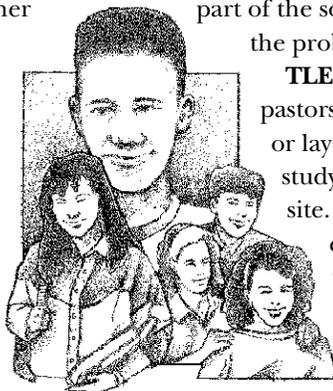
can certainly identify with what youth feel. Reacquainting ourselves with our own past can help us to be better ministers to youth today. Finally reading the report helps us to better understand what our youth are thinking and feeling. Called workers at any level are ministry leaders. As ministry leaders we have an obligation to assist. Either we are part of the solution or we are part of the problem.

TLE: Admittedly, not all our pastors, teachers, staff ministers, or lay leaders will read the entire study report on the CYD website. I'd like it if you could emphasize some key thoughts for those who may read no more than this interview. Can you summarize the overall

results of the study, and the recommendations offered by the outside consultant? Also, what do you think should be done with these results and recommendations?

JN: Last part first. I think the results and recommendations should serve as a catalyst for reflection, discussion, evaluation, and improvement at the local level. They should be discussed with youth, parents, and church leaders separately, together, and more than once. Perhaps the discussion is an on-going, open-ended one. How are we like this? How are we different? With what do we agree? With what do we disagree? If we are the same in some ways, how can we become better, etc?

If people don't have time to chew on the 112-page report they should at least



read the 13-page summary. It's an easy read and provides all the helpful background as well as the findings.

TLE: Do you have action steps you would recommend to congregations in order to engage in discussion about the issues raised by this study?

JN: I'd keep it simple and start slow.

- 1) All stakeholders – leaders, parents, youth – read the study (summary at least). Make the study available to all.
- 2) Set up several discussion/listening sessions, open forums for people to share what they got out of the study. Mixed ages. Teens together. Parents together. Whatever works. Some or all. Ground rules: A) Everyone can talk. B) Every comment matters. C) You can say whatever you like as long as you do it respectfully and lovingly. D) Stress that it's not about any one group. It's about all of us working together as family. Record comments. E) It's a dialog not a debate. Try to see where everyone is coming from. Don't try to prove and disprove things. Trust that in the end, God's Word is still God's Word and you'll probably still be Lutheran when it's over.
- 3) Maybe the local youth discipleship board (or whatever) synthesizes the comments and makes them available for all to see and agree, "Yep, this is what we all said. This is what I heard."
- 4) Maybe use the synthesized list as grist for a series of Bibles studies/sermons.
- 5) Allow the various leadership groups to discuss the list further. Maybe the

church council assigns certain items to other boards or sub-committees to develop action plans.

To me, discussion/awareness raising is key, as is making sure that the local youth are in on it from the get-go. Use this study as a means to start the communication in the church that youth really do matter, and to encourage them to share in the congregation's ministry at higher and higher levels.

TLE: Could CYD perhaps produce a discussion kit that would offer selections from the report, along with questions or activity guides for congregations, youth groups, teachers' conferences, pastors' circuit meetings, etc?

JN: Sure. Why don't you start on it right away! Maybe even Bible studies and sermon helps. Maybe your readers could share and exchange what they come up with – CYD could serve as a clearinghouse for such an exchange of material.

TLE: The urgency of a Christ-centered, committed and compassionate ministry has been evident throughout your answers. Do you care to make any final statement as an appeal for us to do all we can to connect young people to their Savior?

JN: Get at it. It's vital. Time is running out. Souls are at stake. Youth are incredibly important parts of the Body of Christ. None of us are as strong as all of us. There are so many neat opportunities and outcomes that can happen as a result of this whole discussion.

Joel Nelson serves as administrator for WELS Youth Discipleship.

Experiential Learning— Enhancing the Future of Education in our Schools.

Luke Hartzell

YOU CAN HEAR A PIN drop as the thirteen third through eighth grade students perch silently along the shore of the glassy-pure mountain lake. They are poised, pencils in hand, ready to capture the feelings and emotions that the beautiful wilderness scene stirs in them. As time drifts by, the only sound is the occasional scratching of pencils on paper as a choice word is added to a sentence or a sketching stroke captures the contour of some distant mountain.

In Matthew 28:19-20, God commands us to go and make disciples of all nations. *This mission is our job as Christians!* This directive to make disciples of all nations, God's love for us, and the desire to fulfill his commands that comes from his love make us want to fulfill God's commands in the most thorough way possible. The job of "making disciples of all nations" requires more than a surface-level knowledge and understanding of people and the world around us. As Christian educators we need to take our children further. This need begs the question:

What educational programs do we as

Christian educators pursue to deepen our students' understanding of the world around them so they are better able to fulfill God's commands?

The things that happen in a Christ-centered classroom go far toward achieving the goal of a deeper understanding, but there is a certain element that cannot be achieved within the confines of a school building. Here is where experiential learning comes into the educational picture.

Why use experiential learning?

Experiential learning in its broadest sense occurs whenever a person learns by doing rather than by traditional pedagogical methods. For our purposes, we define experiential learning in a narrower sense: *A teaching method focused on the needs of the learner that aims to show the connections between classroom learning and real-world experiences and strives to make the student the most productive citizen possible of Christ's earthly and heavenly kingdoms.* Experiential learning needs to be an essential element in our schools for these reasons:

- 1) Out of love for Christ we desire to educate our children in a way that will best prepare them to be productive citizens of Christ's earthly and heavenly kingdoms—that will give them the “deeper understanding” of God's amazing power and grace. We are encouraged and commanded by God to do so (See Matt. 28:19-20, Deut. 6:6-9, Prov. 22:6, The 4th comm., and others).
 - 2) Christ, the “Master Teacher,” utilized experiential learning in training his disciples (The Great Catch of Fish, The Feeding of the 5000, and others), shouldn't we?
 - 3) There is a strong secular research basis supporting education through experience.
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- 4) In order for our schools to continue to grow and thrive in carrying out our mission to spread the gospel to the world (Matthew 28:19-20), we need to think of innovative, Christ-centered ways we can better serve our students, families, and the communities surrounding us. Education by experience is a tool that enables us to appeal to more families and students resulting in increased opportunities to share God's word and accomplish our Christ-given mission (Matthew 28:18-20).

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A real-life example of success

The vignette at the beginning of this article is something that I was privileged to witness during a recent experiential learning activity that we executed at Sola Fide. The activity was planned and implemented in three phases.

Phase One: Teacher Planning Phase

As I planned this activity I had several goals in mind. First and foremost, I wanted an activity that would allow the students to practice life skills. In other words, I didn't want to hear the ever-popular modicum of the middle and upper grades student: "How am I ever going to use this?" Second, I wanted to design the activity to meet objectives in our school and district curricula and to fulfill state and school standards. Third, I wanted the activity to be something that would broaden the horizons of the students involved by exposing them to experiences that they may have little chance of experiencing otherwise. These goals led me to phase two...

Phase Two: Student Planning Phase

I didn't just want my students to go on a trip that I had planned for them. I wanted them to go on a trip that they had planned for themselves! After all, what in life requires more "real-world" skills than planning and executing a trip? With the goal of planning and executing a two day, two night camping trip to the North Georgia Mountains and a list of learning objectives before them, I turned my 6th-8th grade cooperative learning groups loose and let the plan the trip! With very little facilitation from me, they very successfully selected the

location, made the necessary phone calls to line up our various accommodations, wrote and sent home the informational note/permission slip to the families, arranged our chaperones, compiled our equipment, planned, shopped for, and bought food for all the meals (they even shopped two grocery stores to make sure they were getting the most for their money), and took responsibility to make sure that the appropriate

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"thank you" notes were distributed post experience. While they took care of these things, I designed and I planned the various learning experiences and assessments that the students would complete in connection with the experience.

Phase Three: Execution Phase

On an idyllic Sunday afternoon in October, we left the church parking lot for two days and nights of experiential learning. We camped out a little closer to the stars in the high mountains of Georgia near Lake Conasauga. During

this experiential learning activity the students (and chaperones!) learned basic outdoor skills, used GPS receivers to navigate their way between hidden treasures in the woods, collected and analyzed horticultural specimens of native Georgia plants, responded to the beauty of creation using artistic expression in both written and fine art forms, learned to identify constellations and prominent night sky objects, prepared and served all our meals, managed and cared for our equipment, and just plain old had fun! Based on their responses in an assigned reflective essay, this experience had a profound effect on their lives! This activity is something they will remember for the rest of their lives because they actually got their hands dirty and experienced it!

The words of the students and chaperones say it best:

The trip changed me because it helped me think about teamwork. Helping each other in every trouble. —Ethan, 4th grade

The Sola Fide Experiential Learning Activity brought true hands-on interaction that does not normally occur in a classroom setting. In other words, it is practical application and experience of what the students learn in books. One can read about constellations in books and read an instruction manual on virtually anything but dedicated tactile and visual interaction is both enjoyable and rewarding.—Mike, chaperone

The experiential learning trip to Lake Conasauga changed me in

many unexpected ways. First and foremost, I realized how much I take for granted about my life. There are so many things we take for granted like television, radios and even actual bathrooms. We all must realize that all these things are gifts from God and we should thank him daily for all our possessions. —Christian, 7th grade

It was cool to see that grade school kids could organize and execute a trip like this. It was even more amazing to see these kids worshipping God together in the middle of his beautiful creation. From star gazing to hiking, from pitching tents to preparing supper, all the children showed maturity while still managing to sneak in a game of hide and seek in the dark. It is really awesome to see kids learn, have fun, and worship God all at the same time. —Elizabeth, chaperone

I recently was given the opportunity to join my daughter's class on an experiential learning expedition. What a wonderful time of fun filled learning and interaction with other parents, students, and my daughter! Each child participated in these plans [to make the trip] by either assisting with the camp set-up or by meal preparation. The children were held accountable to accomplish schoolwork but not in the traditional setting of the classroom. This was an exciting time of hands on learning! As a parent, I thoroughly enjoyed this experience, and I couldn't imagine a

Hartzell

more interactive and entertaining way for the students to learn. —
Lisa, chaperone

Conclusion

A major emphasis in our mission as Christians is to educate our children to be productive citizens of Christ's earthly and heavenly kingdom and to have a "deeper understanding" of the wonder's of God's World in which we live. After all, our children are the people who will be carrying out the great commission after we are gone. As an integral and integrated part of what we do in our schools, experiential learning is a powerful tool to help us enhance and achieve our goals in the Christian education of our children!

Remember, with Christ at the center

of what we do, we cannot and will not fail! We must utilize the best learning tools and give them to our children for their greater good and success. Christ lives in us and works through us in his kingdom to bring more people to the knowledge of his saving truth! Praise God for his blessings to us now and always! ✝

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