



The Importance of Early Childhood Learning Centers

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Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem

Education is not the same as it was twenty years ago. More children are entering our school systems and are in need of special education because they were not properly educated as a young child. Schools need to begin educating our children at a younger age in order to make up for the lack of education that is taking place in the home from birth to school attendance. What once was done in the home is now being expected of every school in the nation:

Preschool education is one of the most important issues facing this nation, and it is time America determines to make the most out of this critical time in a child's life. If our children are going to compete in a global market, we must make them global thinkers. It is incumbent upon us to do everything we can-as soon as we can-to prepare them to learn and to function in a world no longer limited by state or national boundaries. (Osborn, 2008, p.1)

Every year that goes by without more government dollars being directed to preschool programs, results in costing tax payers even more to educate the remedial child. "Every dollar invested in early childhood saves \$17 in welfare assistance, special education, and law enforcement later (Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative, 2006, p.7)." Three and four year-olds are ready and able to begin learning. We just have to get them into the proper environment and in some cases out of the house:

At the age of four, our children still have twice as many brain cells as adult brains, and their brains are twice as active. But as the saying goes, 'Use it or lose it.' Whether the nerve connections in their brains are put to work in the service of lifelong intelligence, or whether they are discarded

as a result of disuse, depends on the experiences available to the child.

(Georgia Governor Zell Miller) (Osborn, 2008, p.1).

In light of the problems facing our young children, the need for Early Childhood Learning Centers (ECLC) is becoming more and more critical. Therefore, it is imperative for all schools to invest in Early Childhood learning by providing a licensed Early Childhood Center which will offer a concrete educational foundation, extended hours, and flexible programming to secure future learning success.

Early Childhood Learning Centers and/or All Day Every Day Preschools (ADEDP) will help to eliminate issues of children not being properly prepared for kindergarten, extra tax dollars being spent on special education, and children needing and school districts paying for remedial help in the future:

New research is now demonstrating the surprising dollars-and-cents benefits of early childhood investment. At-risk preschoolers who attend high-quality programs are 'less likely to lose a grade or need special ed, more likely to be literate, more likely to graduate from high school, and more likely to get jobs,' says Art Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research for the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, who has studied the economics of early childhood development. (Bennetts, 2009, p.5)

Several seminars are conducted every year in Minnesota devoting their focus to Early Childhood Learning. The following statistics and critical facts have been shared at these seminars:

- Eighty percent of a child's brain is developed by the time they are five years old.
- Every dollar invested in early childhood saves \$17 in welfare assistance, special education, and law enforcement later.
- Fifty percent of Minnesota children are not fully prepared for kindergarten.
- Five years of childcare costs more than four years of state college tuition.
- Over seventy percent of mothers in Minnesota work outside the home and need quality childcare. Fifty-four percent in southwest Minnesota found no openings in their area.
- The State of Minnesota invests less than one half of one percent in the State of Minnesota's children ages birth to five. (Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative, 2006, p.7).

These statistics show clearly the need for providing a solid educational foundation for young children.

Background Information

All the concerns facing young children and their development, led St. John Lutheran School to take a very close look at its programs. Through this reflective process, it was decided by the leadership and the voters of St. John Lutheran Church and School to start an Early Childhood Learning Center. St. John Lutheran School, a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) school of 105 students in Redwood Falls, MN, operates in a town that has a population of 5,554 people. As the principal, I daily feel the pressure from parents, church members, and myself to make sure that the school children

thrive spiritually and academically, but I also feel the pressure to increase enrollment. Many congregation members ask, “What is the current enrollment of St. John?” Each year the faculty, school board, and pastors develop plans to make sure that we are doing everything possible to ensure the stability of St. John School during these difficult financial times. Therefore, we have explored many options for our continued ministry efforts.

St. John Lutheran School is accredited through the Minnesota Nonpublic Schools Accrediting Association (MNSAA). This accreditation challenges the school to improve in many areas each and every year. Through strategic planning and yearly improvement plans, the leadership and faculty strive to make St. John the strongest and most productive parochial school in our area. These yearly strategic plans led the leadership of the school to consider new and innovative ideas to bring more children into St. John for our strong academic program, but most importantly to hear and learn the saving gospel message.

Through these collaborative efforts, the administration and faculty of St. John also decided it would be very important for the Early Childhood Learning Center to be licensed and accredited:

(Washington, D.C.) – More than one million children are now enrolled in child care, preschool, kindergarten, and other early education programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC Accreditation is a widely recognized mark of quality in early childhood education, and there are now 11,185

NAEYC-accredited programs serving young children and families – an increase of 20 percent over the past year. (Gawrgy, 2005, p.1)

During one of my graduate classes, I was assigned a project concerning primary grade classrooms. As I visited several websites, it became clear more and more “All Day Every Day Preschools” (ADEDP) were opening across the country. Each program that I visited on-line intrigued me even more. It did not take long before the school board, lead pastor, church council, faculty, and principal at St. John began exploring the possibility of beginning ADEDP at St. John. Since the administration, church council, and voters had already voted to start “All Day Every Day Kindergarten” (ADEDK) in August of 2009, the leadership felt it would be a good transition to increase the amount of time three- and four- year-olds spend in a school setting.

Finally, during October 2008, the leadership and voters at St. John decided to move forward and begin looking into and start making the necessary preparations to open an Early Childhood Learning Center (ECLC) for the 2009-2010 school year. This decision pushed the school into immediate action and efforts towards a fully operational ECLC.

Purpose

St. John soon became knee deep in its exploration and preparation of beginning an ECLC. The first point and also the universal theme that came from every individual working on this project was that an ECLC will help build a strong foundation in the learning and upbringing of every child that walks through its doors. When a strong

foundation is built under each child from early on, it helps secure the positive future of all the children enrolled. Great academic and lifelong success will follow:

The first years in a child's life are critical to healthy brain development and future academic success. They provide a window of opportunity with enormous implications for the rest of the child's life. Research shows that comprehensive, high quality care and early learning experiences are linked to children's success in school and life, and save money by preventing future expenses for remedial education, incarceration, and cash assistance (Lovejoy, 2008, p.1).

Offering a quality ECLC would be instrumental for the future educational development of every child and would help each of them to be successful throughout their lives. "Some studies have revealed long-term effects, such as higher rates of completing secondary and post secondary education, and higher income as well as greater financial autonomy and life satisfaction (Schweinhart, 2004; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993, p.2)."

The second and third realizations of the committee were the need to extend and be flexible with the hours for our preschool program, so that we could provide for the needs of the parents sending their children to the new facility. This decision was based on feedback we received from our St. John parents and community surveys (See Appendix: A). These two topics tie together very closely, but have some different nuances.

Presently, the preschools in our Redwood Falls community, including our own St. John preschool program, operate two to three days per week for three hours per day. The leadership of St. John felt that offering parents a choice on the number of hours and days

they wanted for their child could be a substantial benefit to the program. This plan would work in the parent's favor because presently parents have to pay their day care provider while their children are attending our preschool. Once the plan is in place, parents would have a choice. The area day care providers would not be driving the parent's decision on the education of their children. This new Learning Center would be used as a part-time choice for some parents who have the flexibility of time at home or a full-time choice for those families with both parents working. A Learning Center needs to be flexible and provide for the needs of the parents:

Increasing numbers of mothers with young children in the work force, the national spotlight on education reform, concern with anticipated labor shortages along with the country's accompanying need for skilled labor, and continued concern with the unequal school success of children from economically disadvantaged circumstances have propelled the nation's growing appreciation for the need and importance of early childhood care and education (Goffin, 1997, p.13-14).

The leadership and Early Childhood Committee of St. John decided parents should be able to choose the number of hours and days their child attends. We recommended a minimum of three half days, but the parents still have the choice of sending a child three or more half or full days.

This new way of thinking has not only opened the minds of St. John's leadership, but also it has opened the minds of stay at home moms:

When Timisha Daniels had her first child a year ago, she quit her job as a medical assistant in Charlotte, N.C. 'With my income, I would pretty

much have been working just to pay for child care, so we decided that I would stay home with our son'...since then, however, Daniel's husband has been laid off, and her own job search proved unsuccessful for many months. 'If I had known what was going to happen, I would have stayed at my job. Now I'm much more open to child care.' (Bennetts, 2009, p.4)

The final and fourth topic the ECLC committee had to address was how to advertise this new program. The committee had heard and read an article that calling this new program an All Day, Every Day Preschool may carry a negative connotation. Because parents of preschoolers can't imagine their child being on task all day every day, St. John quickly learned the initiative needed to be labeled an Early Childhood Learning Center. The term Learning Center brings with it ideas that not only will learning take place during regular preschool scheduled morning hours, but that the children will learn every day life skills the rest of the day in a gentle non-threatening environment. A Learning Center will take care of the whole child, not just academics.

Chapter 2

In order for an ECLC to be successful, those that are going to send their children to the ECLC must recognize the importance this early childhood education makes in building a child's strong educational foundation for the rest of his or her life. When this strong foundation is built, it is going to help secure the positive future of each child enrolled. In turn it is going to lead to academic and lifelong success. "Besides acquiring a body of knowledge and skills, children must develop positive dispositions and attitudes. They need to understand that effort is necessary for achievement (NAEYC #3, 2008, p.1)." A quality ECLC will be instrumental for the future educational development of every child that walks through its doors and will set them on the path to success for the rest of their lives. The NAEYC (1995) and Swiniarski (2006) stress the importance of creating a firm foundation for our children in their early childhood years. This foundation will be instrumental in meeting the needs and ensuring the success of children in school and ultimately becoming lifelong good citizens.

Children will not just wake up one day and find themselves intelligent. Hard work is necessary for all parties associated with the upbringing of a child. Parents are the primary caregivers for children. This means they are also the ones that have been given the task of educating their children from birth to school age. Sadly, not all parents take this role seriously or are not able to fulfill their role as parent due to societal issues, and they allow their children to fall behind grade level. Sometimes it is not specifically the parents, but the family makeup and the environment that surrounds the children:

The reality of today's families- including those with working parents and those with a parent at home – is that 69 percent of 3-year old children and

82 percent of 4-year old children are in some form of early childhood program on a regular basis. Yet most of these programs are not high quality, despite the research that shows that only high-quality programs produce a strong return on investment. Thus, the goal of school readiness remains largely unmet (ECE, 2003, p.4)

Therefore, an ECLC is a needed supplement to assist in a young child's learning development.

Longitudinal studies have been conducted across many different states and the statistics are all very consistent. There is not much room to argue the importance of Early Childhood Learning Centers for three, four, and five year-olds. In today's society there are more and more families that have either both spouses working to make a living or the children are growing up with only one parent. These trends are leading children to a rapid decline in their advancement in education. Carlson (2006) stated that in Minnesota there are 265,000 (69%) children under the age of six that are in a household where both the parents are employed and need early childhood care.

Carlson (2006) also mentioned that Minnesota has the highest percentage of mothers that are employed outside the home. This leads to more child care facilities needing to be open to accommodate all these working moms. Could this be leading to the decline of children on grade level in Minnesota? Fifty percent (50%) of Minnesota's children are not properly prepared for kindergarten. When these children are not prepared for kindergarten, they will constantly be falling further and further behind or the teacher and parent(s) will have to work that much harder to get them back on grade level. It is not uncommon for children to begin school behind. When they do, they will continue a

downward spiral that is hard to correct. While their classmates are gradually increasing their skill level, low level students that began school behind continue to fall more behind grade level. When these children and their deficiencies are recognized, the proper means can be implemented to get them caught up with their peers.

A quality early childhood program can help bridge the gap between students on grade level and those that are behind. There are many long range benefits to having a high quality early childhood program of which some would include: improved school performance, reduced special education placement, lower school dropout rates, and increased lifelong earning potential (Early Childhood Education(ECE): A Call to Action from the Business Community, 2003; Barnett, 2004).

“The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) estimates that among fourth graders, 40% cannot demonstrate comprehension of what they have read. That percentage balloons into the mid to high 60’s among ethnic groups living in poverty (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; MNAEYC, 2003).” Developmentally appropriate teaching practices address learners’ needs in a holistic fashion, matching academic instruction to a learner’s developing abilities, needs, and interests (see, for example, Miranda, 2004; Van Horn, Karlin, Ramey, Aldridge, & Snyder, 2005; Yoon & Onchwari, 2006).

The position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1997) on developmentally appropriate practice for the education of children from birth through age 8 includes guidelines for high quality child care that include creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance children’s learning and development, constructing appropriate curriculum, assessing children’s learning and

development, and establishing reciprocal relationships with families. Several long-term studies (Barnett, 1995; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Currie, 2001; Lynch, 2004) have shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who experience high-quality pre-school child care not only have better academic outcomes (such as reduced grade retention, lower rates of participation in special education, and higher rates of high school completion), but also demonstrate positive social outcomes (such as reduced arrests for juvenile crime, greater adult economic success, and, for girls, fewer out of wedlock births.)

Why is the government not stepping in to help fund Early Childhood Programs? “Most of the advanced industrialized nations of the 21st century provide comprehensive early education programs for all of their young children. The United States’ endorsement of the movement is long overdue (Swiniarski, 2006, p.201).” In order for governmental agencies or state legislatures to get involved, they have to be willing to spend millions and millions of dollars to get these programs instituted. The problem is that most states do not want to add those kinds of dollars to their budget. What they don’t realize is that the amount of money they would save in the long run would far outweigh the initial costs. “High-quality early childhood educational programs have a high return on investment for low-income children (Early Childhood Education (ECE): A Call to Action from the Business Community, May 2003, p. 6).”

How can this be true? Here’s how it works. Today, when a person’s educational background and his/her ability to perform a certain task are going to determine his or her yearly salary, our society must take action and begin investing in our nation’s future. The investment needs to take place from the bottom up. Early childhood education is the key

and the amount of money budgeted for early childhood education will benefit society. How can anyone argue with the return investment? When low-income children can receive a return of \$4-\$7 for every \$1 spent on them, it seems that our nation should be acting immediately to implement more early childhood (EC) programs. Just having EC programs and getting more students is not enough. Research continues to confirm that the most important way for our nation to receive its return investment to the fullest is to offer quality programs. Quality programs will lead to successful children. (Early Childhood Education (ECE): A Call to Action from the Business Community, 2003) (NIEER, 2007) (NAEYC, 1998.p. 3; Swiniarski, 2006, p.202) “Today, all countries are vying to have the best educational system. In the 21st century’s age of globalization, nations understand that their advancement in the world market and political arena is contingent upon an effective educational system (Swiniarski, 2006, p.201).”

When the children are properly educated at an early age, they will be educated with their peers in their regular classrooms instead of being pulled out to work with specialists for remedial work. “Helping little ones smoothly bridge the distance from their first teachers-their parents-to early childhood programs and, ultimately, kindergarten classrooms is an incredibly important first step we owe our youngsters (Rauschenfels, 2006, p.6).”

When children fall behind, the government and school districts have to begin appropriating the money to cover programs for children below grade level. One example would be when kindergarten through fourth grade children fall below grade level in reading or math they have to be enrolled in Title One. Most schools have a title one program, which has to be staffed by an additional teacher. Most often more than one

teacher is needed because there are so many children that fall into this category. Another example would come through achievement testing:

Standardized aptitude tests measure students' abilities to learn in school-- how well they are likely to do in future school work. Instead of measuring knowledge of subjects taught in school, these tests measure a broad range of abilities or skills that are considered important to success in school. They can measure verbal ability, mechanical ability, creativity, clerical ability, or abstract reasoning. The results from aptitude tests help teachers to plan instruction that is appropriate for the students' levels.

Educators most commonly use achievement and aptitude tests to

- Evaluate School Programs;
- Report On Students' Progress;
- Diagnose Students' Strengths And Weaknesses;
- Select Students For Special Programs;
- Place Students In Special Groups (Kid Source, 1994, p.1)

By law most school districts have children taking achievement tests beginning at second or third grade all the way through eighth. If the scores are not at a high enough level and don't meet "No Child Left Behind" standards, there are many steps that must take place in order to get the children back on grade level. Listed below are all the measures and stages that must take place within the school district to meet annual yearly progress (AYP) through the No Child Left Behind Standards:

Schools or Single-Site Charter Schools

AYP Stage AYP Stage Requirements

Stage 0 = Did Not Make AYP Public Reporting

Stage 1="School Choice", Stage 2= "Supplemental"

1.1, 1.2, 2.1,2.2

Public Reporting and Notify Parents

Develop and implement a School Improvement Plan

Set aside 20% of Title I allocation (plus any flexed dollars) or an amount equal to at the district level for School Choice (Unless a lesser amount is needed. If School Choice is not a feasible option due to lack of choice within district boundaries, the district or charter school may choose to begin SES).

Set aside 10% of Title I school allocation for professional development

Stage 3- "Corrective Action"- is the same as stages 1-2 except for two additions:

Implement a Corrective Action/School Improvement Plan

Set aside 10% of Title I school allocation for professional development - not required, but highly encouraged

Stage 4 = "Pre-Restructuring" is similar to Stages 1-3 with one

addition:

4.1, 4.2

Prepare a Restructuring Plan

Stage 5 = "Restructuring" is the same as Stages 1-4

Districts or Multi-Site Charter Schools Identified at the District Level

AYP Stage AYP Stage Requirements

Stage 0 = Did Not Make AYP Public Reporting

Stage 1= “In Need of Improvement” - 1.1, 1.2

Public Reporting and Notify Parents

Develop and implement a District Improvement Plan

Set aside 10% of Title I district allocation (plus any flexed dollars) for professional development*

Flexing limited to 30% (unless REAP**) – funds transferred must be used for improvement activities

May not be an SES provider

Stage 2= “Continuing In Need of Improvement” -2.1, 2.2

Public Reporting and Notify Parents

Update and implement a District Improvement Plan

Set aside 10% of Title I district allocation (plus any flexed dollars) for professional development*

Flexing limited to 30% (unless REAP**) – funds transferred must be used for improvement activities

May not be an SES provider

Stage 3 is the same as Stage 2 with two additions:**Stage 3= “Corrective Action” - 3.1, 3.2**

No Flexing (unless REAP**)

□Mandatory 2% programmatic set aside of Title I district allocation (plus any flexed dollars) to be used for the District Improvement Plan.

(MN Department of Education, 2010. <http://education.state.mn.us>).

Implementation of a program of this magnitude takes vast amounts of time, money, and manpower. Not even mentioned is the cost accrued for resources and teachers used to meet these standards. All of this could be avoided if children were ready for school and were properly educated early on. Yes, there may always be exceptions to the rule, but we need to do everything humanly possible so that the dollars now being spent on trying to meet AYP, can now be spent on other educational needs. “In Georgia, all public school teachers, including Pre-K, are state certified and, therefore, subject to the same salary scale and benefits as K-12 instructors (Osborn, 2008, p. 7).” Minnesota’s Department of Education (2007) drew up an eight page single spaced document on their website that described in detail what has to be done to meet the No Child Left Behind standards along with Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). The time, money, and manpower cannot be calculated, but it clearly displays a heavy emphasis on human resources.

Various longitudinal studies have looked at quality EC programs. The Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project, and the Chicago Child Parent Center Program have each done studies to look at student success during their schooling years. They have found that students’ achievement test scores rose, fewer children were being held back and were staying closer to grade level, and fewer low-income children were being placed in special education programs. When these studies looked beyond the EC school years, they found that more children who received EC education were more likely to graduate from high school, were less likely to become

negatively involved with the law, and the delinquency rate dropped (Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, and Miller-Johnson 2002; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, and Mann, 2001; Early Childhood Education (ECE): A Call to Action from the Business Community, 2003; Barnett, 2004).

Quality EC programs can have a great impact on a child's life. A quality program will build the foundation for a lifetime of success. The immediate results will help them through their educational years and become academically successful, but ultimately they are helping to insure their future. Academically sound students are the ones who will receive better paying jobs, thus avoiding welfare, they will not become negatively involved with the law, and they will have more choices in their adulthood (Schulman, 2005).

Schulman (2005) laid out some other guidelines that led to future success. Parents must instill in their children that school will lead to success later on in life. Schulman then reminded all children and families that they must take better care of their bodies and improve their physical wellness. As children are growing up, help them learn how to manage money so they can become financially independent and not rely on the government to pay their way through life. All of these measures must start from the parents and start early in a child's life.

In further writing, Schulman (2005) stressed the importance of mothers that were involved must get good jobs. They needed to show their children what was expected of them. These parents needed to model good parenting skills so their children learned properly and so positive results were seen by the children and future generations followed in their positive footsteps. Schulman (2005) stated that ECLC can help provide time for

mothers to work and a structured environment in which children can be positively nurtured.

Wilson (2000) has spoken about several longitudinal studies monitoring early childhood that have been conducted to date. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project, and the Chicago Child Parent Center Program are three longitudinal studies that have helped with the fight to get more school administrators aware of the benefits of early childhood education. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project has been the driving force for early childhood education for more than 40 years now. This project was started with aims of having a high-quality educational program that would spend the majority of its time and effort working with young children ages 3-4 that may be at risk of failing in school. The study accomplished its goal as being a strong intervention for those children that were at risk, but it also demonstrated many positive outcomes that were not necessarily expected from the study. The data showed that those involved in this program were less likely to be involved in crime and delinquency, but the statistics surprisingly showed much lower numbers of teenage pregnancy and welfare dependency. Other positives that were recorded some 27 years later in the study were that those who were part of this program were three times more likely to own their own home and about half as likely to need government aid. “Overall, the study documented a return to society of more than \$16 for every tax dollar invested in the early care and education program (Woodard, 2004, p.1).”

The Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project also set out to prove the importance of early childhood education. “The significant findings of the experiment were as follows:

- higher cognitive test scores due to enhanced language development
- higher academic achievement in both reading and mathematics
- more likely to attend college
- later childbearing

The project concluded that high quality, educational child care from early infancy was therefore of utmost importance (Wikipedia, 2009, p.1; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, Johnson, 2002).”

Wilson’s (2000) study was conducted to look at low-income families, but in the process realized that the data discovered illustrated that there are no socio-economic boundaries when it came to educating the children at a young age. All children, of all nationalities, regardless of economic status needed to be educated at an early age. The advantages can not be argued.

The statistics do not lie, but how do public school districts or private schools begin implementing early childhood learning opportunities when money seems to be the most impeding roadblock? A group in Los Angeles is trying to change the way our country looks at preschool and so they started First 5 LA. Cooper (2004) stated it best when he said what everyone was thinking. No one wants to see a child fall behind. Isn’t that exactly what we are doing when we don’t give every family and every child the same opportunity to enroll in quality educational programs? First 5 LA was started in California to show just exactly how a government program can provide quality preschool to all people of every walk of life. It is not a secret that California is striving to have early childhood programs and licensed childcare homes as the norm and that the government

should be expected to pay a portion, if not all, the monies needed to run successful programs such as these. First 5 LA is making it a goal that over the next five years they will set aside money that will go towards paying for preschool programs. Once their goal is reached and their dollars have been set aside, First 5 LA hopes to be able to offer one year of free preschool to every child in Los Angeles county who wants to attend a First 5 LA early childhood program. The ultimate goal is establishing a strong education foundation for every child's future success.

Many cities and communities are going out on their own. Maybe that's what it's going to take to have this initiative catch on across the country and get our national government to begin allocating dollars for early childhood success in every school. The administration of President George W. Bush knew the importance of education. On January 8, 2002 the "No Child Left Behind Act" was enacted. "No Child Left Behind is the federal law targeting school-age children. First 5 LA is trying to ensure that no preschool child is left behind: That every child, not just in Los Angeles County or California but in the entire nation, will have access to quality early educational experiences (Cooper, 2004, p.15)." Those that signed the NCLB Act and helped put it into practice knew just how important education is to our country.

It appears that the longer we wait to begin educating our children, the more money we pay to get our children back on grade level. Rick Ellingworth (2010), Superintendent of Redwood Area Schools, stated that "The Minnesota State Foundation Aid Per Pupil Unit" started in 2009-2010 with a base dollar amount of \$5800 per child. Ellingworth (2010) then stated that the Redwood Valley School District receives .612 of that amount per child enrolled in Kindergarten (\$3549.60). Then he went on to state that

grades 1-3 receive 1.06 of the \$5800, (\$6148). The next group Ellingworth (2010) spoke about was grades 4-6, and they receive 1.115 of the \$5800 which amounts to \$6467 per child. The final group that Ellingworth spoke about was grades 7-12, and they receive 1.3 of the \$5800 or \$7540 per child. Finally, when we were almost done with the discussion, Ellingworth was asked how much does a preschool child bring in for the district?

Ellingworth (2010) was sad to inform me that a preschool child receives about \$100 from that Minnesota State Foundation Aid per Pupil Unit amount. That would come out to be .0172 of the aid amount. This information is a very compelling statistic for the community. It doesn't take long to see where our government believes our main focus should lie. If we would spend more dollars on preschool, we would not have to spend as much money getting our children back to NCLB standards. . Hence, again the importance of ECLC can be clearly seen.

This information brings up the debate with some government agencies. Should preschool be for all children or just those that are at risk of falling behind? Many Americans believe preschool should be for all children, but when it comes to dollars and cents, some believe having a targeted preschool program(a program that is reserved for those with greatest risk of poor achievement) offered is more realistic. This debate can be looked at from many different sides. On the one side targeted could be better because it would be much cheaper, but universal preschool would be good because statistics show it is not just low-income families having children that do poorly in school. "Universal programs are likely to receive greater public support so that they are both of higher quality and reach more children than targeted programs (Barnett, 2004, p.1)."

When low income families are placed together in economically-integrated preschool programs, there is a much better chance for learner gains. Barnett (2004) stated that a recent study proved that low-income children when integrated into a quality, economically-integrated early childhood program had substantially higher language score improvements than children of their same age and race who attended a preschool program only accepting low-income families.

WELS (parochial) schools typically do very well academically. The reason is that many of these WELS schools are on a strict budget and so two grades (and sometimes more) are often in the same classroom. This situation allows the younger and lower students to learn from the older students. In so doing, the younger students are actually learning at a faster rate because they are being pushed academically by their older peers. This system is the basic concept many are trying to say would benefit preschoolers. Place the lower level children in the same room with higher level children and the lower level children will advance academically. There are many pros and cons for targeted and universal preschool, but unless we raise the “education bar,” our country’s children are going to continue slipping academically. “If all of the children in an elementary school had attended a high-quality preschool program, the overall academic and social climate would change. This could further boost learning and development (Barnett, 2004, p.10).”

Simply offering preschool to all 3 and 4 year-olds is not enough to raise the academic scores of our children, “quality” has to be the main focus in Early Childhood Centers. Almost everyone has had a bad or ineffective teacher during their educational years. When a student is involved in this type of classroom setting, it feels like time and effort are being wasted. Preschool is no different. The children may not realize they are in

a poor program, but active parents will be able to tell. It is not enough just to have an ECLC program, it must be quality. How do we make sure preschools are offering an effective program? Several organizations have been formed to address these issues:

The Business Roundtable (BRT) and Corporate Voices for Working Families (CVWF) believe federal and state efforts to develop early childhood educational systems for 3- and 4- year olds must be based on a set of guiding principles that define the components of a successful system and high quality programs. These principles draw on current early childhood research, lessons from K-12 educational reform efforts, and applicable lessons from the nation's experience in building a voluntary system of higher education (Early Childhood Education: A Call to Action from the Business Community, 2003, p.2).

The BRT and the CVWF have developed six principles, all interconnected and all necessary, for the success of the early childhood educational system:

- Learning – A successful early childhood educational system views children's learning as the central mission.
- Standards- A successful early childhood educational system articulates standards for children's learning and program quality that align with state K-12 academic standards.
- Teachers – A successful early childhood educational system ensures that teaching staff possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to help young children enter school prepared to succeed. (Green, 2006)

- Parents – A successful early childhood educational system supports parents as their children’s first teachers and provides high-quality program options to parents who choose to enroll their children.
- Accountability – A successful early childhood educational system embraces accountability for measurable results.
- Partnerships – A successful early childhood educational system builds crosscutting partnerships to govern, finance, sustain, and improve the system. (*Early Childhood Education: A Call to Action from the Business Community*, 2003, p.4).

These six principles are very important to address before an Early Childhood (EC) program is started.

School enrollments are decreasing across the country. The WELS Lutheran Synod (parochial) is being affected directly by decreased enrollments. Since the year 2000, thirty-nine out of three hundred sixty-six WELS Lutheran Schools have had to close their doors due to a synod enrollment decline of 4,135 students over that same period:

Table 1: Number of schools and enrollment of WELS LES and ECM by year

	2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
LES	366	359	357	354	350	345	343	337	327
LES students	29424	28202	27297	26632	26525	26035	25712	25289	
ECM	313	343	364	383	386	396	400	398	401

ECM	5775	6530	8103	8449	9131	9354	9567	9823
students								

Table 2: School enrollment

0-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	201-250	251-300+
39%	36%	13%	9%	3%	.3%
133	120	44	30	9	1

Source: WELS Statistical Report- Number of schools and enrollment of WELS and ECM by year, (2009). Used with Permission from WELS Commission on Parish Schools

Many schools are experiencing lower test scores from their state or district testing agency. The number of divorced or single parent families has been on the rise for years. On the occasion when you see a two parent family, it seems most often that they both have to work to make ends meet because of economic conditions. “Preschool education has become a necessity for middle-income families, and many preschoolers have no parent at home during the day (Barnett, 2004, p.4)” Schools districts are spending millions of dollars to pay for children that need remedial help because they are so far behind. Schools are now expected to educate the part of the child that used to be assumed by the parents. Instead of the schools being a secondary educational program behind the parents, they are now on their own in many instances. “There is substantial room for the vast majority of children to improve school readiness through better preschool education (Barnett, 2004, p.5).”

Since we have fewer families where there are both parents living in the same home and because the U.S. economy is behind and more parents have to work, day care providers are bursting at the seams and often over their legal limit of children allowed under their roof. Reporter Candice Carlisle (2009) reported that a 4- year-old died at a Denton day care in January because it had over two times the limit of children allowed under licensure. Parents don't know what to do. They need day care, but there are no openings. All these items continue to cause pressure on families. They also cause pressure on schools that continue to have to meet the expectations set by the state to meet national standards for each curricular area. Often when the family is broken up, the children will suffer academically. There are just not enough hours to go around for the children to get the help they need. What can be done to help our country out of this tail spin?

“Even before kindergarten, parents should be aware of ways to make the most of learning opportunities for their young children. One important choice for many families in their child's early years involves preschool or child care (NAEYC #1, 2005, p.1).” Many schools operate preschools, but what is their purpose? Is it to put the children in a classroom so they simply get used to being in a school environment?

Most preschools operate on a two or three day week for two to three hours on those days. That is good if the main focus of the program is to get them acclimated to a school setting or to make friends. But what if the purpose is to better educate the child and better prepare them for school in the future? “Americans are, in fact, increasingly seeking out day care that provides a stimulating learning environment (Bennetts, 2009, p.5)

Preschool hours need to be extended and those hours need to be flexible if parents are not going to be the primary educators. When a typical preschool offers approximately four to six hours a week for 3-5 year-olds, they are not going to excel and be ready for kindergarten. The only way they will be ready for kindergarten after only attending a preschool program for six hours per week is if the parents are taking on the role as primary educator. In today's society, that is not often the case. When the child enters kindergarten and the parents notice their child is behind, they can't understand how that could have happened. They believe preschool is designed to do all teaching of the child:

When young children have not had the learning opportunities they require in order to succeed in school, early childhood programs need to provide even more extended, enriched, and intensive learning experiences than they do for children who have had a wealth of such experiences outside of the program or school. The earlier in life those experiences are provided, the better the results for children (NAEYC #4, 2009, p.2).

Quality Early Childhood Learning Centers (ECLC) are the key to a child's academic success. The parents are now able to look at their child and their child's needs and decide how many hours a week their child will need. ECLC's hours can be flexible anywhere from three hours a day, two times a week, all the way to five days a week for the entire day up to 5:00pm. The parents now decide what is best for their child and how much time does my child needs in the ECLC. A very active parent, who educates at home, may only need to send his or her child to the ECLC for two days a week, but possibly a one parent family may need to send his/her child for more days and more hours:

The first years of a child's life are a crucial development period, and children who are nurtured and stimulated during these years are much more prepared for formal reading and math and are more likely to have the social skills they will need when it's time for kindergarten. Parents are a child's first teachers, but early childhood educational programs are also important, especially with the growing number of families with one parent, and families where both parents work full-time (NAEYC, 2005, p.1).

The final area that the ECLC has to look at was how to advertise this new program to the public. Batty, (2009) wrote about an elementary school in Sheffield that received negative feedback from the community because it decided to drop the word 'school' from its title. Several individuals in leadership roles felt the word 'school' carried a negative connotation. Instead they went with the term 'place for learning.' Several of the teachers backed the leadership, and they too were in support of the new term, "place for learning." They wanted this facility to be one where it is a place for family learning and not the regular routine of school.

"The NAEYC has approved new Early Childhood Program Standards that outline what NAEYC believes every child care, preschool and other early childhood education programs should provide to nurture the learning and development of young children. These standards can be used as a guideline by parents to determine the quality of a preschool or child care program (NAEYC, 2005, p.1)." It is the responsibility of the directors of the program to make sure that these standards and guidelines are followed.

Therefore, taking on the title of a learning center carries responsibilities and recognition as a high quality program.

There are certain guidelines that must be followed to operate an ECLC. In Minnesota all programs need to be licensed. The Minnesota State Licensing website <https://daycare.com/Minnesota/> / April of 2010/ listed all the teacher and site requirements necessary to have a licensed facility. By becoming licensed, you are telling everyone that is inquiring about your school that you have met all state standards .

Other states have different guidelines. An ECLC may choose to be accredited. The number one organization for early childhood educators is the NAEYC or the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The NAEYC began its accreditation association in 1985 hoping to raise the quality for early childhood programs. This organization was established to help parents choose the first and best program that their young child would attend. The NAEYC has many guidelines to follow in order to become accredited. Early childhood centers need to meet national performance standards that are far more developed than most state health and licensing procedures. The staff of these programs must continue their training as long as they are involved in the program and then they must be observed and critiqued by other accreditation experts (NAEYC, 2005), (Goffin, 2003)

Parents need to realize that an ECLC is not a Head Start Program. Head Start is designated for the low income families. Often Head Start facilities do not offer the quality educational programs that an ECLC may offer:

Yet, after 40 years, Head Start standards have never been raised to the levels of the preschool programs research has found to greatly improve the

later school success of children in poverty. Head Start teachers are not required to have the qualifications expected of teachers generally and are paid only half the average salary of a public school teacher. Head Start spends less per child than the public schools even though smaller class sizes are required (Barnett, 2004, p.9)

There are some negatives to this whole process. There is no crystal ball to look at that says America's children will get smarter or stronger academically if we spend \$100+ million on early childhood education. The longitudinal studies that were conducted, especially the 40+ year study of the Perry School Project, show that there were great differences between those students that were part of the project and those that were not part of the project. But, gains were not made by every child. "Additionally, the preschool group generally had higher school achievement and higher literacy scores, and their parents had a more positive attitude toward schooling (Manning, M., & Patterson, J. (2006/2007, p.1)." The study results typically use terms like 'generally' the students achieved higher, or the parents had a 'more positive' attitude. Those terms don't constitute 100% agreement by all parties. So, for the children who had strong academic gains the study was considered a success, but for those who did not experience strong gains and found themselves on the lower side of society the study may have been considered a failure.

There are so many variables to consider when speaking about educating young children. A common philosophy taken by parents for raising children is, "Should money be an issue when ensuring the safety and well being of a child?" If a child was sick and had to go to the hospital for an extended stay, wouldn't a parent find a way to pay any

amount of money to secure their child's health? A child's education is also his/her health. Seasoned veteran educators have seen many children skip school or grudgingly attend school because they are below their peers academically. These children make themselves physically sick because of their distain for school. In most cases, if the child were a better student and better prepared for school, they would not have such a negative feeling towards school (NAEP, 2003. p.1).

Some 3 and 4 year-old students are not ready for this type of learning environment yet. Some children will do much better if they stay at home with their moms or dads. Belsky (2007), and MNAEYC (2003) reminded all parties involved that the quality of parenting is still the strongest influence a child can have on his or her cognitive and social-emotional development. Parental involvement is far more influential than any child care experience. Regardless of the amount of time spent in child care or preschool, when parents take an active role in the education of their child and they are supportive and caring, the children's test scores are going to go up. Belsky (2007) also stated that they will also have more chance for success in the later grades and will develop good work habits that will lead to better behavior in the classroom. The learning that can take place in a one-on-one atmosphere can be tremendous. "Early childhood programs don't give kids the one-on-one attention that some may require to thrive, as they are designed to meet the needs of children as a group -- and not as individuals (Stewart, 2008, p.1; Bloom, 1984)" A stay at home mom or dad can take his or her child on regular field trips along with having an established working curriculum. These curriculums can be found very easily on the internet. It simply takes time, discipline, and a desire to teach your own child.

Quality early childhood centers are vitally important for a child's educational success. Educating children early helps to secure the success of these individuals throughout their lives. Despite those that feel that children may not be ready for school by age three or four, it is imperative for our children and our country to begin the educational experience at an early age. There is overwhelming support stating the positives of early childhood education. Now it is time to implement these programs for the betterment of our children and society.

Chapter 3

I believe our new ECLC program and its flexible extended hours is the missing piece that St. John has been looking for to increase enrollment, offer quality academics, and bring the saving message of salvation to little children. This program is already producing fruits, since we have received into membership five new members to our congregation since it opened in August of 2009. They come for the convenience and the quality of the program, and they stay because the Holy Spirit has been able to work in their hearts.

The program is also looking to double its numbers in the second year of existence. Our congregation is building a new school with two classrooms dedicated to early childhood. The administration at St. John is already taking students for the second classroom, and summer, the busiest time for enrollments, has not even started.

While attending Masters Degree classes at Martin Luther College (MLC), I realized the need to begin to think outside of the box on how to increase enrollment. Education is different from what it was when I was growing up. The number of stay-at-home moms is decreasing. Sometimes I have to lead where others don't want to go, and sometimes as leader my responsibility is to prove the way I want to go is for the betterment of the church, school, and God's kingdom. Some would call it faith and that is true, but it is also looking at data that God has placed before us and using that data to improve our school and its programs. "For most families today, child care is a necessity. Two-thirds of all American women are working by the time their first child is a year old, compared with only seventeen percent four decades ago (Bennetts, 2009, p.4)."

It is my hope and desire to lay the foundation for the St. John Early Childhood Learning Center of Redwood Falls, MN, and in turn create an academic foundation for the children who enroll in our early childhood program. When a strong foundation is built, the program is given the proper means necessary to flourish, and the Lord will bless our efforts. The members and leadership of St. John School have often wondered why our enrollment has not grown. It is my hope, as well as the hope of many others in our congregation, that by providing an ECLC, we will be able to teach more little lambs about Jesus, not just as three and four year-olds, but all the way through their grade school years.

One of the missing components that our school has had over the years was keeping the children in our school after preschool and kindergarten. Our preschool program in the past has only been two days per week for a total of four hours. This barely got the students and parents in the door. Since our school opened its doors in 1983, our kindergarten program has only been three days per week, and so some choose to leave and go to a 5 day week kindergarten, while others decide to stay with us. What we continued to notice is that as soon as the children were graduating to kindergarten or going on to first grade, we would lose them. I believe it is because the parents and children did not form strong bonds with other St. John member families due to not enough hours of contact. With the new ECLC, there will be more opportunities for fellowship, and the children will be together longer, create stronger and more lasting friendships and then hopefully it will be harder to change schools.

Another intriguing issue may be that our PreK/Early Childhood and kindergarten are currently in one building, and the rest of grades 1-8 are in another building across the

alley. In 2010 our school will have a brand new facility and PreK/Early Childhood through 8th grade will be in the same building. The parents and children will be together, and each of the rooms will only be a short distance from each other. This situation will allow the parents to see what could be their child's future classroom and teacher. It will also let the children see the rest of the school and student body and become more acclimated to both, while the parents will be mingling with other parents while they wait to pick up their child after school.

Much of our new building was designed to bring more early childhood children into our school and then keep them in our school. We know that if we don't get them in the door early on in the early childhood years, the percentage of children we get to transfer to our school in the later grades will decrease drastically. The thought of diminishing enrollments and the need to educate children at an early age is why I believe that our early childhood program is the answer. The proof is in the articles, books, periodicals, seminars, and word of mouth that I have used in this research paper. Our nation is spending millions of dollars on helping children get caught back up to grade level, when they could be spending millions to make sure children never fall behind. "In April, \$2 billion from the stimulus package was earmarked for states to support child-care services for families where parents are working, seeking employment, or getting job training. The funds will be used to provide greater access to child care for families (Bennetts, 2009, p.5)." This form of spending goes against many government agencies. It means that the government now has to be proactive instead of reactive. The statistics and longitudinal studies show that children who attend early childhood learning programs are far more likely to have a positive impact on society. Implementing an ECLC does not

mean it will be a cure for all children, but it would help enough children succeed to make the money spent by the government be looked at as a positive step to improving American society. “If we want a stable workforce, investing in child care will not only help improve the school-readiness and work-preparedness of children, but it will also improve parents’ ability to stay employed (Bennetts, 2009, p.5).”

Many states are currently offering some form of early childhood programs. The question is whether or not they are offering quality programs. In the town where I live, it is not, “Can you find ‘quality’ childcare or preschool, but can you find childcare or preschools with openings?” Our school opened an Early Childhood Learning Center this year, and we wondered if we would be able to fill the program to capacity in the first five years or so. Within one month, our program was filled to capacity with 25 students enrolled. Our K-8 school has such a good reputation around town, that when parents of 3 and 4 year-olds around town heard we were starting an ECLC, they enrolled very quickly. They also heard that our program would fill up due to the fact that there are no other ECLC’s in town except for the Head Start program offered for low income families.

The information I learned from this project that I can bring to my principal position at St. John is staggering. First and foremost I learned that our program has to be all about quality. Bells and whistles are nice, but without a quality program we will not get the families in the door, but most importantly the students will not grow academically and be ready for kindergarten and beyond.

The literature that I found concerning the importance that early childhood has on building a child’s foundation for learning for his/her lifetime was powerful. I had never stopped to imagine how the trickle down theory plays into a child’s academic future. The

statistics that speak about the success children will have if they are properly educated at an early age was staggering. It makes me realize that our school and its leaders made the right decision about starting an Early Childhood Learning Center.

Yes, it is true that parents can stay at home and do a fantastic job of raising their children and make sure they will be ready for kindergarten. But remember that means the parents have to be disciplined and willing to put in the hours to educate and create situations where their child will also learn how to play, work, and speak with other children. There may be pros and cons for both situations, but in today's society I think it is pivotal that we offer learning that can take place in a warm, caring, nurturing, and safe environment, so the parents don't have to be worried about their children and their educational needs.

A hymn written by Howard Edwards III in 1955 speaks volumes for our school and its mission to get more children in our school so that we can preach the Word of God to as many people on earth as possible. The title is "We All Are One In Mission." The words can be our guide as we continue on our journey to build our early childhood program at St. John to a point of overflowing and follow the Lord's command when he told us to GO:

1. We all are one in mission We all are one in call.

Our varied gifts united, By Christ the Lord of All.

A single great commission, Compels us from above,

To plan and work together, That all may know Christ's love.

2. We all are called to service, To witness in God's name.

Our ministries are different; our purpose is the same.

To touch the lives of others, With God's surprising grace,
So ev'ry folk and nation, May feel God's warm embrace.

3. Now let us be united, And let our song be heard;

Now let us be a vessel, For God's redeeming Word.

We all are one in mission; We all are one in call

Our varied gifts united, By Christ, the Lord of all (Christian Worship,
1993).

Our Early Childhood Learning Center is going to help us do exactly as the hymn writer states, "To touch the lives of others, With God's surprising grace (CW, 1993)."

Appendix A



**Preschool Opportunity
3-5 year olds
St. John Lutheran School
Redwood Falls, MN**



www.stjohnredwood.org

St. John is looking to "expand" their preschool program. In order to serve our community better, we are hoping you will take a few seconds to fill out the survey and send it back. Your opinion is greatly appreciated. Thank-You!

_____ Would you consider sending your child, age 3-5, to an "All Day-Every Day" preschool program, 8:25-2:50 with an option of extended care?

A.M. _____ P.M. _____

Before 8:25 After 2:50/Extended care would be an added cost

_____ Would you consider sending your preschool age child to a Monday, Wednesday, Friday preschool program?

_____ half day (A.M.) _____ full day

_____ I am not interested in St. John for a preschool.

Prices will be approximately between \$2.25-\$2.50 an hour

Comments: _____

Name/Age of child: _____

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Names: _____

Telephone Number: _____

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