

Floor Committee #13: Congregational Services C (Lutheran Schools)

Subject: Commission on Lutheran Schools

Reference: *Book of Reports and Memorials*, pp. 45,46

Report No. 01

We give thanks for the blessings of Christian education and the work of the Commission for Lutheran Schools (CLS) as it faithfully works to fulfill its mission to guide and assist congregations in advancing the gospel of Jesus by providing resources, training, and personal assistance for starting and strengthening Lutheran schools. CLS daily provides services to our synod's 431 early childhood, elementary, and secondary school ministries with a gospel-focused, servant-minded, excellence-driven, and partnership-committed approach.

We recognize God's gracious blessings even as our school leaders, teachers, parents, and students have endured a very different and challenging time for Christian education. Amid the challenges that came with COVID-19, many of our schools were able to connect with more unchurched families and share the gospel with their children. Though early childhood followed the nationwide trend of lower enrollment, WELS elementary enrollment and Lutheran high school enrollment each grew by about one percent. Six of our districts experienced growth in enrollment, while six saw a decline. State and county guidelines had a lot to do with how students could be served.

CLS is to be commended for strengthening ministries through the following initiatives:

1. WELS Ministerial Growth and Evaluation Process—Training modules and materials are now available to assist the growth of all WELS teachers through a Ministry Development Plan. New teacher growth tools and evaluations are also now available.
2. *Telling the Next Generation: Utilizing Our Schools for Outreach*—The Commissions on Evangelism, Discipleship, and Lutheran Schools continue to offer one-day seminars focused on effective outreach practices for WELS schools and early childhood ministries. The presentations focus on the critical role of relationships and a planned and effective harvest strategy.
3. The 21st-Century Principal Initiative, Principal and Director Training Program, Early Childhood Emerging Leader Cohort, and Principal and Director Apprentice Program—The shortage of principals and leaders in our schools has grown to over 10 percent. These initiatives are effectively addressing both the need for well-trained school leaders and the shortage of school leaders.
4. WELS School Accreditation and consulting services—WELSSA, our nationally recognized WELS School Accreditation program, continues to grow. There are 145 WELS schools currently accredited and 15 schools in candidacy, that is, working through the process for the first time.
5. Microschools and online virtual schools—CLS is seeking to capitalize on the bimodal teaching and learning that emerged out of necessity during the COVID-19 outbreak. A pilot microschool is planned for the 2022–23 school year in the southeast quadrant of our nation. CLS has obtained accreditation of 9th-grade WELS virtual school, with plans of obtaining accreditation of higher and lower grades in the future.

At a time when we face a shortage of educational leaders, teachers, and pastors, we encourage our congregations to actively promote the teaching ministry and the need for educational leaders, including principal and early childhood ministry directors, among their congregational youth. Seventy-five percent of WELS congregations do not enjoy the benefit of an elementary school and/or area Lutheran high school. Pastors and members of those congregations are also encouraged to identify and encourage youth in their Sunday schools, youth groups, and homeschool settings to consider ministry. Every congregation member can help recruit students eager to pursue gospel ministry at Martin Luther College—students who might become your next pastor, teacher, or staff minister.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented opportunities for many of our WELS schools to make in-roads into the community. Because of these opportunities, many non-members have enrolled their children in our schools, and it is a great blessing to be able to proclaim the gospel to these children every day. Typically WELS schools have been satisfied with just serving the child, but a more substantial goal would be to eventually bring that non-member family into the congregation. This usually only happens when there is a really strong, aggressive harvest strategy. The committee encourages WELS schools to participate in *Telling the Next Generation* to learn how to implement a harvest strategy in what may be a couple of years of tremendous opportunity to position our Lutheran schools to reach unchurched and dischurched people.

Over the past eight years, WELS has averaged about four school closings per year. Some of those closings are because two schools joined to become one. Sometimes a school closes because they have gone a number of years without a teacher or a school leader. Thanks to a grant, Lutheran Schools was able to add recently retired principal James Sievert to the Lutheran Schools team as a part-time called school consultant during the biennium. School consulting exists to partner with congregational consulting to help support the overall ministry of a congregation.

May the Lord continue to bless the efforts of CLS to guide and assist congregations in advancing the gospel of Jesus by providing resources, training, and personal assistance for starting and strengthening Lutheran schools.

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