



Shaping theFuture

Spring 2011 ▾

Letters ▾

Features ▾

Networks ▾

Resources ▾

Conferences

LEA Home



LEA Network
Early Childhood Educators

Universal Preschool

by Rev. Ray Smith

“We’ve been doing this for 20 years and now they tell us we’re not quality?”

“I went to the meeting and they told me I could have the threes!”

“I didn’t collaborate with the public school and now our preschool is basically for three year olds.”

“I wish they’d just leave us alone.”

“I’ve been director of the preschool for eight years and now they tell me I have to get another endorsement. What should I do?”

As pastor of a congregation with a preschool that has served the community for over 25 years, and as an Early Childhood Education advocate in Iowa District West of the LCMS, I have heard these comments and many others like them over the course of the past three years. What is universal about Universal Preschool is frustration on the part of private, faith-based preschool providers, and the frustration is well-grounded. What does the future hold? How will we continue to attract parents to our preschools so those we are charged to serve can continue to hear and learn about Jesus?

We can only speculate about what the future holds. State government shortfalls and changing political climates make the future unsure with regard to state-funded universal programs. What appears static may well prove to be mutable.

We can be sure that our Lord will not abandon us. ...we will continue to find our way.



What we can be sure of is that our Lord will not abandon us. By faith, through prayer, study, and commitment, we will continue to find our way.

That said, what we should do to continue to attract parents and their children is not a “one size fits all” matter. In some venues collaboration and partnership is a good fit. In others, independence remains the best course. Both ways are viable. Both ways present challenges. Both ways require intentional pro-active efforts.

In the Fourth Commandment we are charged by God to honor our parents and other authorities, of which the state government is included. We can and in many cases do fulfill our responsibility to serve God and honor the authorities that are in place to regulate early childhood education.

In collaborative partnerships, if at all possible, we should join the dialogue early on. When partnership agreements

Buttons, buttons, who has the buttons?



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Review, Reflect, Resolve

If universal preschool becomes reality in your community, what will you do to attract parents to your faith-based early childhood ministry? What will you not do?

Links & Resources

For a good starting point on issues surrounding [Universal Preschool](#), see this Wikipedia article.



Other articles you might be interested in in this issue of **Shaping theFuture:**

Churchworker Praise by Bruce Hartung (Feature)

Shout to God! by Jill Zempel (ETnet)

are reached and state funding is made available (resulting in discounted or free tuition), it is imperative that we hold on to our standards of sharing the Gospel with our students and their families. This may require extending the program hours to avoid “direct religious education” during the state-prescribed period, but this is not the end of the faith-based curriculum.

We should continue to build on those standards that historically exceed new state requirements.

In some partnerships parents desiring the faith-based option over the public option may result in student overload. This could present new challenges as well. As a collaborative partner, the Lutheran provider could offer the faith-based curriculum to any student in the partnering programs. What a wonderful blessing it would be to provide “Jesus time” to students outside our programs.



Where the Lutheran program has been in place for several years, it is important to acquaint the public school representatives with the reality that state-defined quality education is not necessarily the standard that their programs should strive to attain. Our Lutheran programs often have standards that historically exceed new state requirements. We should continue to build on those standards.

By keeping open minds and working with the independent school districts we can in many cases be good partners that help to raise the level of early childhood education in our communities.

Where independent Lutheran programs have chosen to co-exist with state-funded universal programs, the challenges are just as significant. Cost, funding, and tuition are always part of the discussion. Committees and boards that are responsible for preschool programs must do two things at the very least:

We will continue to attract parents and their children to our programs because we offer what public schools, states, and governments can not offer—the love of Christ who first loved us.

- Support outside fund raising efforts.
- Advocate for the program in the congregation(s).



It is also imperative to gain the pastor’s active support. By doing these things, the preschool program becomes or remains an integral part of the congregation’s ministry.

Preschool educators should establish a dialogue with kindergarten teachers, if one does not already exist, even in non-partner settings. This will both aid the preparation of the students for their kindergarten experience and build a working relationship with other educators.

Congregations should also remember that “the laborer deserves his wages.” **1 TIMOTHY 5:18** As part of the congregation’s ministry, directors, teachers, and para-educators should be compensated appropriately. Iowa is a universal preschool state, with funding provided through state grants awarded to districts that apply. The shifting political climate leaves a number of unanswered questions, and funding remains static.

With these thoughts in mind, as independent or partnering programs we will continue to attract parents and their children to our programs because we offer what public schools, states, and governments can not offer—the love of Christ who first loved us. Does this make us different? Yes it does, and that difference will lead us into a future of continued service to parents, preschoolers, and Jesus Christ.

Rev. Ray Smith is Pastor at First Lutheran Church and One Way Preschool in Missouri Valley, Iowa.

Photos courtesy One Way Preschool, Missouri Valley, Iowa.



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