Public Education: For the Sake of the Future

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Public education is a hot topic in political, journalistic, and educational circles. For the masses of our children in this generation and the next, public schools will be the fundamental system of education. We have no other institution that can begin to meet the educational needs of all our children. For this reason alone, every person in this country has an interest in promoting the most responsive, respectful, and academically rigorous system of public education possible.

The system of public education in the United States was created to assure a literate population able to sustain a democratic form of government. This is as true today as it was one hundred years ago, and public schools are more successful today than they have ever been. But some important factors supporting education have changed significantly. With the privatization and economic segregation of our society, the term “public” has taken on negative connotations. How do you feel about the choice between a public or private restroom, public or private golf course, public or private transportation, public or private housing? Most people prefer private services, if they can afford them. Unfortunately, many people have transferred these feelings to education. The result is that many people feel private education is in all cases superior to public education. When this is a commonly held belief, public schools become a place to educate children who cannot afford another choice. Both these children and society are victims of such privatization.

Quality elementary or secondary education of any sort requires the participation of three parties: schools, parents, and students. Public schools are often left with one important piece missing. High levels of parent involvement are common to all award-winning schools because parent participation is directly related to student success. Unfortunately, when our most privileged families either move away from the schools or transfer their interest to another setting, we sentence our remaining children to second-rate educations. No child should have to attend a school where a vast majority of the children are poor. This is second-class education (continued on p. 100)

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Parochial Education: For the Sake of the Children

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Saying yes to parochial schools comes easily here. In 1996 we will celebrate the centennial of Grace Lutheran School in the Chicago suburb of River Forest. For a century the school and congregation have united in a shared ministry that has nurtured children and families with quality education in a Christian setting. Our particular blessing has been teachers motivated by Christ’s love to do their best for kids in a world increasingly alien to the values based in the gospel.

We do not pretend perfection as we keep an eye on the problems which can accompany the promise of parochial education (religious, cultural, and racial ghettoization, poor pay and poor educational performance, school as substitute for parental spiritual responsibility, loss of common mission and ministry by splitting off school from congregation, etc.). Our experience convinces us overwhelmingly, however, that to have our school and its attendant problems is preferable to having no school, thus losing the benefits of this ministry.

A recent occasion illustrates the point. Early in 1994 Victor Waldschmidt died in his 83rd year. He had served 33 years as principal of Grace Lutheran School until his retirement in 1980. At his funeral the Grace School choir sang the magnificent music that proclaims the gospel in the beauty of the Lutheran musical heritage, as the children do on many Sundays of the year. Grace School teachers read scripture and brought testimony. The congregation included graduates from years back as well as more recent alumni who were there because of what they had received in their formative years at Grace School. The participation in worship of children, teachers, alumni, parishioners, and people of the community, all thanking God for Vic’s gifts as a quiet motivator and educational visionary, is a commentary on why we cherish this school. The gifts include:

- striving for educational excellence by grounding the whole learning experience of children in the biblical faith and its fruits of loving God and each other with soul, mind, and body

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by definition. A population poorly educated in second-class schools puts our government and the health of our society at risk.

Public schools are a mirror reflecting what we value. When we care more for acquiring things than for children, public schools suffer. Increasingly, the majority of voters who make the financial decisions about schools do not have school-age children. These adults may or may not feel responsible for educating the community’s children. However, it will take all of these children to provide a competent work force for the future. If all children are to become productive, responsible, tax-paying citizens, all adults will have to support the growing-up process. Public schools were created to provide everyone with an even start and to educate for citizenship. That is harder than it used to be, but no less important.

The good old days of public education weren’t all that impressive. Equity wasn’t a part of our daily reality, and we didn’t worry too much about students who dropped out. They could work at home or find jobs. It was acceptable for schools to expect students to be ready for the predictable system they found in place. This is no longer the case. Today we are the only school system in the world attempting to educate all children, including those with severe special needs or handicapping conditions. We serve children who do not speak English, who are totally unfamiliar with the cultural expectations of a school setting, who will never be able to function without a personal aide in attendance. These are our customers and to be successful in meeting their needs we must collaborate with other public and private agencies. It isn’t easy, it isn’t always elegant, and it certainly isn’t inexpensive. But it does fulfill our public mission of equity and equality of opportunity for every child. Only public schools will ever be able to bear this expense and provide these opportunities.

Equality of opportunity for all students regardless of physical or intellectual ability, economic status, race, or gender is possible, but it doesn’t happen easily or by segregating populations. Equity exists when entire communities believe and invest in the concept. Those communities know they have quality schools when people who have choices send the very best they have—their own children.

Children are our most important resource. The number of births to unmarried women increased more than 70 percent between 1983 and 1993. These children are more likely to be raised in poverty, less likely to have the advantages of good health, family support, and nurturing. Many children from middle-class homes are being raised by adults who no longer find time for parenting. We are witnessing the unraveling of the American family, with children paying the price. Public schools are often called to fill the void. This is an area where churches and schools should become partners for the common good, and there are some wonderful examples of such partnerships. Whether our motives are noble or practical, this country cannot afford to throw away a generation of children. We are stewards of the land, the democratic system of government, and the ideals of freedom and equal opportunity. But most importantly, we are stewards of our children. Children are a gift we send to a future we will never see. It will take all the adults working to educate all the children to send our finest gifts to the future. This is the mission of public education.
the freedom to teach and model values the gospel produces for a distinctive and lifelong discipleship in church and world
personal contact with parents through parent/teacher interviews three times a year in place of report cards sent home
opportunity for teacher and pastor to see and know the child and family in the wider setting of congregational fellowship and service, and vice versa
welcoming the cultural, racial, and religious diversity of children and families within and outside the parish; half of our school enrollment comes from non-Lutheran families, providing an opportunity for mutual respect, tolerance, and growth
recognizing the school as an increasingly important arm of mission outreach to children and families who know nothing of Christ and the call of the Holy Spirit to belong to him and his people
bridge building with other parochial and public schools in the area through shared faculty conferences, informal conferring on matters of mutual importance to the community, exchanging ecumenical worship gatherings with nearby Catholic schools, and student interchange through academic and sports events

Our conviction is that educational pluralism is healthy. The day is past for parochial and public schools to be adversarial or narrowly competitive. We all need each other, and the best each can bring to children in these times when their well-being suffers an ever lower priority.

A humbling reality of the past five decades is the closing of too many parochial schools in America’s urban ghettos where they are sorely needed. For over a decade we have had a mutually beneficial partnership in support of two Chicago inner-city parochial programs, one of them a thriving Lutheran school serving children of the infamous Cabrini Green neighborhood. Another and older example of reversing the trend of parochial school abandonment of poverty stricken neighborhoods is the Detroit Urban Lutheran School, a success story of creative cooperation over the past twenty years by a cluster of Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod inner-city congregations. But these are exceptions to the larger, troubling trend of Lutheran withdrawal from areas where the parochial school could be an anchor and oasis.

The basics that we at Grace School and congregation have found essential for our mission are a clear-cut spiritual identity, intentional evangelism without proselytizing, good chemistry between teacher and pastor, and the supportive commitment of the congregation.

We see these basics as relevant to a time of unprecedented challenge and opportunity for parochial education. Public schools can no longer claim educational monopoly; school problems everywhere are too deep, vexing, and obvious. As secularism, in sometimes subtle ways but more often with monstrous defiance of all things sacred, stalks all of us and especially our children, schools committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ will surely have their place.