# A Lutheran School Responds to Homeschooling

Sherry Prange has taught in Lutheran schools for 18 years. She currently serves as principal of Christ Our Savior Lutheran High School in Evansville. IL, now its third year of existence. She holds a BA and an MA in Educational Leadership from Concordia University in River Forest, IL. Her articles "How Much Is Enough?" and "Keeping the Faith" appeared previously in Lutheran Education.

hrist Our Savior Lutheran High School (COSLHS) in Evansville, Illinois is still a very young school. It is in its third year of operation and has only 31 students. Five of these students are part time and receive the majority of their education in their home. The families of these five students are active in their respective congregations. Only one of the families is Lutheran.

No one knows exactly how many children are being home educated currently in the United States today, but estimates indicate approximately 1.5 to 1.9 million students in kindergarten through grade twelve were home educated during the 2000–2001 school year (Ray, 2000).

#### Questions

Homeschooling generates many questions: Are children really learning in this homeschool setting? Why are so many choosing to homeschool their children? And most importantly, at least for the purposes of this article, how does a Lutheran school respond to this movement?

As the Association of Christ Our Savior Lutheran High School shaped plans to open a new Lutheran high school, members of the Association raised the above questions and a number of additional pragmatic questions concerning homeschooling families. Association members were aware that children of some of the local pastors were being homeschooled. They also recognized the fact that a number of area families had left Lutheran schools to homeschool. Some had friends or neighbors in their local communities who homeschooled their children. Would parents who are homeschooling their children desire to send their child to a Lutheran high school? How did the Association feel toward those who, from their perspective, did not seem to value Lutheran education in the same way they did? What might these families want from us? Would home-schooled children be enrolled on a full time or part time basis? Should students be accepted on less than a full time basis? What if a family was going to use our high school just so their child could play sports? What should be the response of the Association? Quite obviously, these were difficult questions.

## **Negative Biases**

Today I serve as the principal of COSLHS, but during this initial planning period I was teaching at a nearby Lutheran elementary school and was just another member of the Association. I must admit how easily and insidiously Satan can work among us. One pastor's family decided to remove their children from the school and educate them at home. I became self-righteously indignant. Wasn't our school good enough?

The pastor's wife patiently tried to explain to me that they felt God gave parents the duty to educate their children. Finances also played a part, since they were not only paying tuition but also traveling a considerable distance to bring their children to school.

Unfortunately, I did not want to listen. I knew that this family was gifted intellectually. I knew that the mother had been educated as a Lutheran teacher. Consequently, I countered with the argument that their children needed the social interaction offered at the Lutheran elementary school. Once again she patiently explained to me how her children would receive that socialization, but I, once again, was not willing even to consider that it could be accomplished somewhere other than a Lutheran school, and perhaps just as effectively. I had my mind made up. A Lutheran education in a Lutheran school was the only real education those children ought to receive.

My purpose in sharing the above incident and the biases contained therein is that I realize those same biases are quite typical of many others, especially Lutheran educators. I've been privy to the conversations of other Lutheran schools' principals

and teachers as they unfavorably critique those who exercise their prerogative of choice. I have read comments on a Lutheran listserv that confirm that others also feel negatively, as I did, toward those who choose something different from our Lutheran schools.

We may deny this negativity, but as long as we harbor feelings of resentment toward those families who make decisions that we believe are not in a child's best interest, it is impossible to have the kind of relationship that will allow us to truly minister to them. In other words, the negativity becomes an obstacle to effective service.

# **Reaching Out**

A beginning place for any Lutheran school considering how to reach out to

those currently involved in home education is to examine such negativity. Through my experience with homeschooling parents, I learned that I needed to confess my own tendency to want to play god, to decide what is right and wrong and what is best for everyone else. I needed to confess resentment, my superior attitude, and my unwillingness to let God do the leading. And just how do you feel toward those who choose to homeschool?

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As the Association's deliberations continued, the negativity abated and it became increasingly obvious that the membership was being led toward an understanding that all parties involved might benefit if COSLHS allowed homeschooled students to attend part time. After all, parents might not know enough to teach every high school subject, and we could be of assistance to them in this regard. Also, parents who were homeschooling might not have access to such things

as the chemicals used in a chemistry class. If COSLHS were open to allowing the home-schooled student to take one or more classes, seemingly both the family and the student would benefit. We certainly knew that the adolescent would receive an excellent education at our school.

And COSLHS would receive the benefit of the additional tuition dollars brought in by adding students to classrooms that we knew would not be full. Certainly, this would be of assistance financially. Then, again, by enrolling home-schooled children part time in our high school, perhaps some might enjoy their experience and decide to become full time students. And this is exactly what happened.

During the second year that homeschooled students were in attendance at COSLHS, one decided to take three classes instead of just one. Her younger brother will enter next year as a full-time freshman.

Again, everyone wins. One homeschooling parent offered to become the coach of our cross-country team. She possessed a great deal of experience. At their second meet, the team came in third, ahead of one of the competing public high schools that had fielded a cross-country team for many years. Another homeschooling family found a donor willing to pay for eighteen basketball uniforms.

Everyone wins. Just as in a congregation when members begin to share their enthusiasm with everyone willing to listen, one of the homeschool families affiliated with COSLHS started talking about everything they found pleasing. Soon we had three additional homeschool families enrolled.

This, then, is a second factor in considering a Lutheran school's relationship with those who homeschool—weigh the negatives and the benefits. When both the school and the families benefit, everyone indeed does win.

#### Issues

In spite of above positives, as school administrator, I maintained a certain level of questioning skepticism. Just what kind of students would we get? Would they be in academic trouble? That was my suspicion. Would they be disciplinary problems? I didn't think so.

In addressing my skepticism, I discovered that more and more articles are being written and research is being conducted on those who are home educated. Regarding the growth of the movement, for example, Brad Wong wrote in the *Seattle Times* (June 15, 2001), "Since 1990, the number of Washington state students educated at home has nearly tripled, far higher than the rate of growth in public- and private-school enrollment combined, state statistics show." Many are turning to homeschooling in Washington and, also seemingly, around the country.

In terms of the academic performance of home-schooled children, the recent news media coverage of the National Spelling Bee won by a student who had been homeschooled may be at least an illustrative indicator, if not compelling evidence, that such students can compete at a high level. Also in terms of academic achievement, a study done by Brian Ray (1997) for the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) found that home educated students excelled on nationally-normed standardized achievement exams. On average, homeschoolers outperformed their public school peers by 30 to 37 percentile points across all subjects. In a conventional school, the average Reading, Language, and Math score would be at the 50th percentile, but when homeschooled students were tested, their composite Reading score was the 87th percentile, their Language score was the 80th percentile, and their Math score was the 82nd percentile. In another study, reported in *Time* magazine, results were even higher. John Cloud and Jodie Morse (2001) reported that in 2000 the average homeschooler's Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score was 1100, approximately 80 points higher than the average score for the general population.

For me, some additional questions still remained, however. Were my homeschool students "above average"? As I assessed the academic performance of the homeschool students at COSLHS, I found that four of the five did primarily A or B work. The fifth student had been removed from a Lutheran elementary school during fourth grade because the child was not succeeding. When I conferenced with the child's fourth grade teacher, I discovered that she had difficulty keeping pace with other students and had fallen behind. Her mother informed me that she chose to homeschool to try to "catch her up." After she began having difficulty completing work in our school, the mother indicated to me that her daughter had been tested and was found to have difficulty with sequencing. Thus, I learned that there was actually a medical condition causing some of her problems. I also learned that my general perception that parents cannot do as good a job as Lutheran teachers was perhaps not entirely accurate. Be that as it may, those students who were being homeschooled and also attending COSLHS seemed to be doing very well academically.

Perhaps a more important remaining concomitant and pragmatic question was whether or not I was willing to build the schedule in such a way as to meet a homeschooler's needs. It takes a great deal of time to work out the scheduling. Considering home -schooled students meant I needed to take several factors into account. When a student needed multiple classes, they needed to be scheduled back to back. When a sibling group was arriving, I needed to schedule their classes side by side. Also, I was asked to consider the homeschooling family's needs, meaning

their own teaching schedule. In one situation, the family wanted their child to have a class at the end of the day so he could stay for sports. In another case, the family wanted the student's classes to be in the morning to meet the transportation issues involved in scheduling teaching her other children. As a principal, I couldn't guarantee that I could satisfy everyone's needs. However, it was inherently obvious to those families that I was doing my best to accommodate their schedules. They were happy with that, and they felt the school cared.

My suspicions regarding the issue of discipline proved correct. The deportment of the home-schooled children at COSLHS was a non-issue. We did not experience any problems other than that the one student who was having difficulty sequencing was not completing her schoolwork on time.

Beyond the questions concerning academic performance and discipline, what about the issue of athletic competitions? In the early days of Association discussion, the question of sports had been raised. Would the Association allow future home educated children to come to our high school only for sports? Initially, the answer was clearly in the negative. Everyone seemed to agree that full time students who would attend COSLHS could possibly be penalized. In an obviously extreme scenario, perhaps none of the full time students would make the school team. Only non-attending students would play.

Evolving from this discussion came a more positive subsequent decision that all students who attended COSLHS, whether full time or part time, would be equally eligible to play sports. While it was recognized that someone might someday complain that his or her full time student was sitting on the bench while a part time student was playing, this was the policy that was going to be implemented

A concomitant issue had been raised at the same time. How much would part time students have to pay in terms of tuition? The Association made the decision to divide the tuition by the number of class periods in order to determine approximately how much a full time student would pay per class. The actual amount a part time student would pay was just slightly more than what a full time student would pay. It was then decided that an additional \$50 would be added as an administrative fee for the first class taken. The second and all succeeding classes would be the same price until a student reached the level where he/she was paying the full tuition. Finally, a registration fee was also to be paid. Part time students pay slightly over one-third of the cost for a full time student.

As this policy was being decided, everyone could more clearly see the financial benefit of having those students for even one class. Another interesting side note was that, after the school opened, it was a homeschool family who found a donor

willing to pay for eighteen basketball uniforms. Thus the high school benefited again.

### **Lessons Learned**

In my search to understand why families choose to homeschool, I came upon a study conducted by Bielick, Chandler, and Broughman (2001), which listed ten reasons given by parents in 1999. The number one ranked reason was the belief that the parent could provide the "child" a "better education at home"; ranked second was "Religious reasons" (p. 10). As I coupled my recent experience with homeschooling parents with the results of the study, I was forced to ask myself, just what is God conveying to me regarding ministry? What is being said to us as teachers about Lutheran schooling? What are the implications for outreach?

Upon reflection, I am led to the understanding that ministry begins inside me. Where is my heart? Am I willing to follow when God calls me to give up ideas that I would rather hold on to?

Am I willing to learn those lessons he is trying to teach me? Am I willing to be used in ways I didn't expect? Looking at ministry in relation to homeschool families means accepting the reality that God may use someone besides

Looking at ministry in relation to homeschool families means accepting the reality that God may use someone besides Lutheran teachers to disciple children effectively.

Lutheran teachers to disciple children effectively. Perhaps I haven't been willing to see parents as truly knowing what is best for their own children.

It's easy to make the argument that some parents don't really know how to make good choices for their children. But then I'm reminded that I thought I knew parents like that (for example the pastor's family indicated above who chose to take their children from "my" school). That mother today is on the Board of Directors of COSLHS, giving her time, talent, and treasure in many ways. Her oldest son will be a ninth grader next year. I know that she is struggling now, as she did when she removed him from the Lutheran elementary school. Her son is advanced in many areas. She wants to be sure that he would be able to continue learning. She still would have many miles to travel to bring him to school, and finances are still an issue. Will he come to our school? I don't know. But I do know that my heart is changed. I know that I truly can believe that whatever she decides will be appropriate for her son.

She knows him best. She knows his strengths and his weaknesses. And she knows mine.

Whether he comes as a full time or part time student, or if he doesn't come at all, what I've learned is that I can truly welcome all who come, and I can still love those who choose not to come. I have no concerns that they somehow may be taking advantage of me, the school, or anyone else. And that's the very beginning of ministry—to be able to reflect God's love to all those he places around us.

Lutheran school leadership needs to understand the rationale of families opting to homeschool. They believe that they can give their child a better education. Better than what? Better than the school their child would have been attending.

Lutheran schools do a very good job of educating students. Perhaps another lesson here is that we do not do a good enough job of marketing or "blowing our own horns." Last spring's achievement test at COSLHS revealed that the class average of the sophomores in science was at the 87<sup>th</sup> percentile. Should I advertise that fact? Obviously. Why? Because parents who are worried that they may not know science well enough to teach it may decide, for example, to send their child to our high school. It may be only one class in the beginning. But that opens the door for them to find out who we really are and how we really act behind closed doors. It may be our one chance to share the Gospel with them.

A second reason for marketing is even more important. Although the majority of homeschooling families may not be Lutheran, many of them are Christian and want Christian values for their child. Thus, they might consider a Lutheran school, even though they would never consider many other school options. The resulting question is, "How effectively do we talk about the Christian emphasis of our school?" Perhaps we talk about the field trips we take. Part time students are welcome. Do we assume people are coming because of academics and don't really want to hear about Jesus, so we talk primarily about academics? We think we'll just slide Jesus in as a by-product.

Each school is different. God uses each teacher and principal to touch those he brings. He may draw those who can only use our school for one class, for library purposes, for sports purposes, for whatever needs they have in their lives. Ultimately, while we may not be able to serve every person who comes to our doors, we can be open to discussing ways we might more effectively reach a larger population of students who need what we have to offer. We can pray that God opens our eyes to see the opportunities that he has placed in front of us and provide ways to help us connect with a hurting world who needs the message of hope that we have to offer.

# A Lutheran School Responds to Homeschooling

For the interested reader who wishes to learn more about Lutheran homeschooling, a publication called *Feed My Lambs* is available at a subscription price of \$6.00 per year. The editors, Steve and Robin Teske, may be contacted at 408 W. Summit Ave., Shenandoah, Iowa 51601-2336. The publication features, among others, articles such as high schoolers writing why they like homeschooling. The editors have contact with people in different regions of the country, if one wanted to find a connection with someone who actually homeschools. Also, for those desirous of gaining additional understanding regarding homeschool issues, the website www.vegsource.com/homeschool/ has many different types of discussion boards and is a place one could ask questions or just read about the different issues being described by homeschool families.

Many public school districts throughout the country are beginning to take initiative and lead the way in offering resources assisting homeschoolers. Lutheran schools can learn from these initiatives and can be on the cutting edge of leading the way. It is a heart issue. Are we willing to consider education from a new and non-defensive perspective.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. 1 Cor. 15:58b

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