

SCHOOL / LINK

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How many people do you *really* know?

How many people do you know in a tangible way? How many people could you not only readily put a name to but also add a comment, such as 'You're a Tigers supporter!', and they could reciprocate? Needless to say, there would be many.

To go a little further, consider how many people you *really* know, which goes beyond being aware that the person concerned supports the Tigers to why he or she does so. Some describe this *really* knowing as grasping the intangible and when it can be reciprocated the number of people in the circle shrinks considerably. However, for professionals such as teachers, school staff and pastors, who work directly with people, the circle of those who *really* know each other can become extensive.

Knowing each other

Educators, and surely all who work in Lutheran schools, are concerned with really knowing their students. This kind of knowing goes beyond the *what* and the *how* of the student to the *why*. It is a knowing that probes beneath the surface and unravels the layers that lie behind a student's responses and actions. Really knowing a student is also a sensitive knowing that does not demand entry into a student's life, nor infiltrates or invades the private world of the student. Instead, the educator stands ready, welcoming the student into his or her own world, while waiting

to be invited into the life of the student, so that each can *really* know the other. It is reciprocal. It is a giving of each other that shares, confides and informs in a relationship of trust. If Lutheran schools are true to their desire to be concerned with the development of the whole person, educators within them can have no lesser aim.

The demands upon schools today make the development of this kind of teacher-student relationship difficult.

Accountability, expectations, results, awards, public relations are all terms, each with their own particular requirements, with which schools are faced continually. In the end, the major purveyor that measures these outcomes is the student. Thus it is very easy to see students as 'producers'. As producers students are known for the results they do or do not achieve, the correct or incorrect way they wear the uniform, the number of times they behave appropriately or inappropriately, their success or lack of it on the sporting field, their participation in school life or absence from it, and so on, all the time accompanied by laudatory or incriminating record keeping.

Contrasting to a view of students as 'producers' is seeing them as 'persons' and here comes another great problem for teachers. How do teachers find out who their students really are so they can *really* know them? Surely it is essential to be aware of the student's world outside the school.



The importance of families

Students come to schools loaded with information and opinions gained elsewhere and research shows that, irrespective of its state, the family is a most significant factor in determining the meaning that a student makes of life. The impact of family values has a profound effect upon schools and educators. If the aim of a school is to *really* know its students, then it needs to understand their families. One school saw this as so important as to have as its motto, 'No enrolment of a student without the enrolment of the family'.



Theme for this issue: **School / Family Relationships**

When a school develops such an approach its duty of care statistics explode and the task of the school becomes enormous. No matter what level of schooling is offered a commitment to both the family and the student begins already at the enrolment interview. It is conducted in such a way that the principal has a responsibility to the family clearly in mind and by the time the student commences at the school the new family is as embedded in the school as its child. When the teacher teaches, that educator is mindful of the student's family and as the pastor attends to the spiritual needs of the student, it is not done in isolation from the spiritual life of the family to which the student belongs. A school that has a commitment to *really know* its students as persons, cannot hope to achieve that objective unless staff members *really know* those students in relation to their families. Ambitious standards like this may be difficult to meet in schools that do not find themselves nestled in small, well defined communities, but such an approach is just as important in larger, more complex school communities, and probably more so.

The concern for the individual student as a person is necessary for that person to be fully developed in all aspects of life. Permeating all of life for a Christian is a relationship with Jesus Christ and Lutheran schools desire this relationship for their students, families and personnel. Faith can not be forced, but an environment is provided for it to be expressed, nurtured, questioned and developed. This requires an open relationship where people are respected and feel free to share of themselves; where people are encouraged to be themselves, the real people that we all want to be able to understand. Such freedom, such trust, and such respect build true community.

All members of that community have strengths and weaknesses. In an educational outcome driven learning environment schools go to considerable lengths to identify these differences. Strengths are directed and weaknesses

identified, with some students being regarded as being at risk in various areas. Seeing students not only as producers, but also as persons goes beyond the purely academic domain. Out of concern for the student as a spiritual being schools are well aware of those students and their families that are at risk spiritually. Of particular focus are students and families who are not under the umbrella of a spiritual home, be it Lutheran or other. These are the members of the school community who do not, as yet, see the need for spiritual support, or who would not have a natural haven if they needed such assistance. For these students and families the school either is or stands ready to be their church and, indeed, there may be a good deal of standing ready to be. During this time, however, the school personnel will do all they can so they and 'at risk' families *really know* each other and mutual understandings allow a family to seek out members of the school community for support if and when the family crunch time comes. And there is little doubt that it will come, at least once in every five or six years according to research.

The importance of staff

A Lutheran school has often been described as an enlarged family or a mutually associated community, comprising other linked, smaller communities. When it comes to encouraging a sense of community within the school and the sectors within it, however, there is one group within the enlarged family that is pivotal in developing the sense of *really knowing*, appreciating and accepting each other. That cohort is the staff.

If there is a desire to engender what has been described as community in the large family of the school amongst school families, the modelling of a sense of community by the staff is essential. There are many things, however, that mitigate against the staff as community and serve to keep staff members apart. The size of the school can dissipate a feeling of community amongst the staff, classroom walls keep teachers apart, administration may appear to close doors

against the staff and vice-versa, the busyness of schools and business filled staff agendas prevent personal sharing, departments cause divisions, and the list goes on.

Unfortunately a school will not have a sense of community if the staff does not have the opportunity, desire or encouragement to be a community itself. A school can never be something that its staff is not, therefore the efforts to provide opportunities for staff to *really know* each other must be relentless. Surely it begins with time put aside for staff to gather around the Word of God. Here staff members can struggle with what a personal relationship with Jesus Christ means and explore the impact that understanding has on their relationships with each other. Some schools use retreats for this purpose, while others use times of study. Then there are the times of just being together and learning what makes each other tick, having the time to become aware of the joys and hurts in each other's lives. Where all staff members have a desire to build community, there is an example of what it means to *really know* each other for families to follow.

Blessed schools

Twenty years ago Emeritus Professor, W G Walker, addressing a national conference on school governance, said 'we can indubitably identify the schools as the churches of the late twentieth century' and there is little doubt that this is true in many ways of Lutheran schools in the early twenty-first century. Walker went on to describe these 'surrogate churches' also as 'surrogate homes' which led him to sigh 'Poor teachers, poor schools, poor curriculum, poor administrators, poor God'.

However, we shout, not poor, but blessed. Blessed teachers, blessed schools, blessed curriculum, and blessed administrators. Thank you God for the opportunity for us to be instruments of your message of healing, reconciliation and grace to our students and their families.

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