

**Building Tomorrow's LEA:  
Executive Summary of Research on  
Trends in Lutheran and Non-Public Education**

**June 2016**

Lutheran Education Association  
River Forest, IL



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# 1. Introduction

Lutheran Education Association (LEA) is about to enter its 75<sup>th</sup> year of “linking, equipping, and affirming educators and workers in Lutheran ministries to build up the body of Christ.” As it looks to the future for ways to be even more relevant and effective in support of Lutheran educators, LEA’s Board of Directors has been engaging in discussion and planning to determine the best way to move forward. Through a strategic planning process, the Board has identified key areas to be addressed and questions to be answered. How to sustain and grow the organization, what role LEA can play in the bigger picture of Lutheran education, and how to best meet the needs of Lutheran educators worldwide are among the major topics being considered.

In fall of 2015, LEA sought and was awarded a grant from the Thrivent Financial Foundation to assist the organization in assessing how it can best prepare for future years of ministry and service and how it can support its efforts. Under the theme of “Building Tomorrow’s LEA”, the proposal detailed a variety of ways that LEA can use information collected from various sources and take advantage of outside expertise in exploring new ways for LEA to carry out its mission. Thrivent Financial is funding the proposal through two challenge grant phases in which we plan to:

- 1) Conduct research to better define the context of Lutheran education in Lutheran schools and other non-public settings, and
- 2) Explore means by which LEA can better support its mission and organization effectiveness.

Following is an executive summary of the first phase of this initiative. In early 2016, a project director and focus group facilitator were retained to carry forward the initial steps of design, then implementation. The research was comprised of three major components:

- Data acquisition and analysis,
- Interviews of national leaders in Lutheran and non-public education, and
- Focus Groups involving Lutheran educators from several areas of the country.

Data were collected from a variety of public sources, including the National Center for Educational Statistics, Council for American Private Education, National Catholic Education Association, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Education Association,

and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Directors from all of the above education associations were interviewed either in person or by phone.

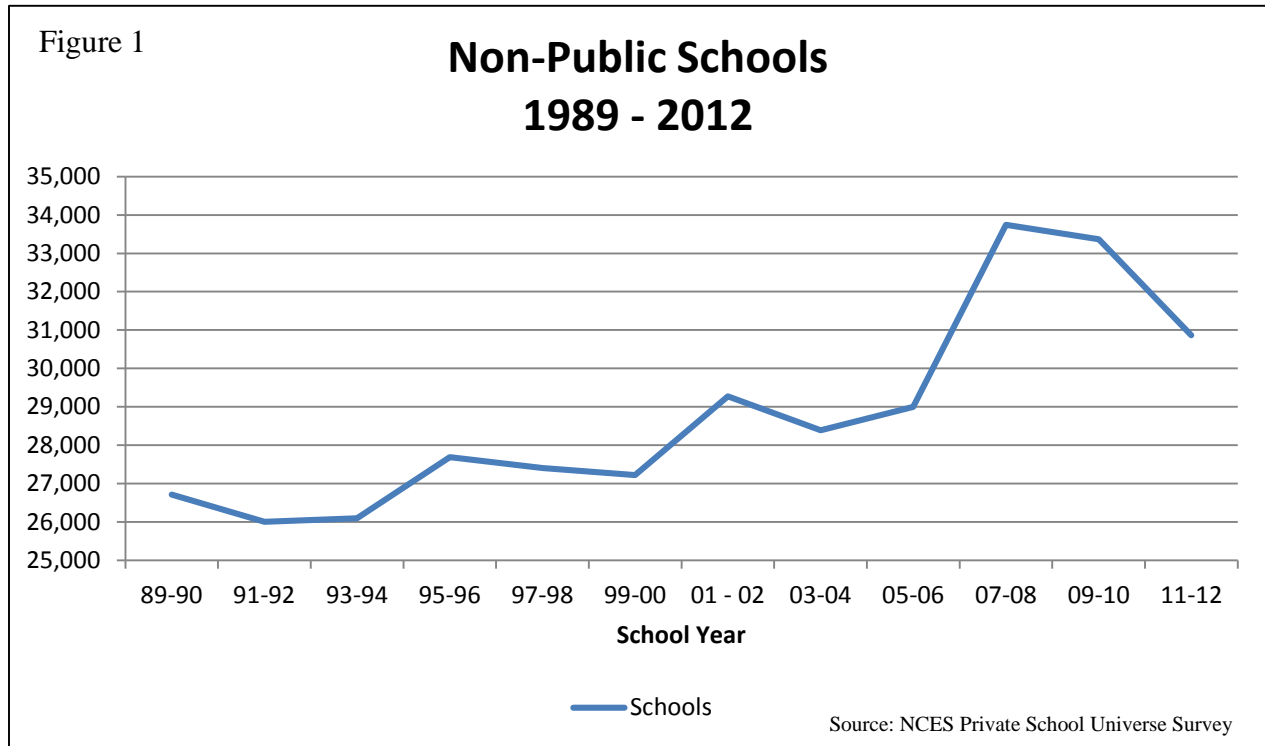
Focus groups were conducted from April through June in seven locations, including Wisconsin, Chicago, Florida, California, Indiana, and Minnesota. The groups varied in size, and totaled 75 teachers and administrators from early childhood, elementary, and secondary Lutheran schools. Similar questions were used as the basis for discussion among all of the groups. Demographic data collected revealed that the average years of professional experience in education was 19, with 23 participants having less than 10 years in the field. About 30% of the participants had no previous background in Lutheran schools during their own years of training.

Our goal is that the summary of the data collected through research, interviews, and focus groups will prove helpful in gaining a more complete understanding of the context of Lutheran education today and provide some insights into what professional educators are saying and thinking regarding direction for the future. Most importantly, we hope that the questions raised and the dialog begun during this study will continue. LEA seeks a strategic and collaborative approach to growing Christian education in a changing world, an approach that will lead to the best possible educational experience for students worldwide.

Special thanks to Anya Nebl (Project Director) and Dr. Richard Herman (Focus Group Facilitator) for their extraordinary efforts in conducting this study and assisting in developing this report.

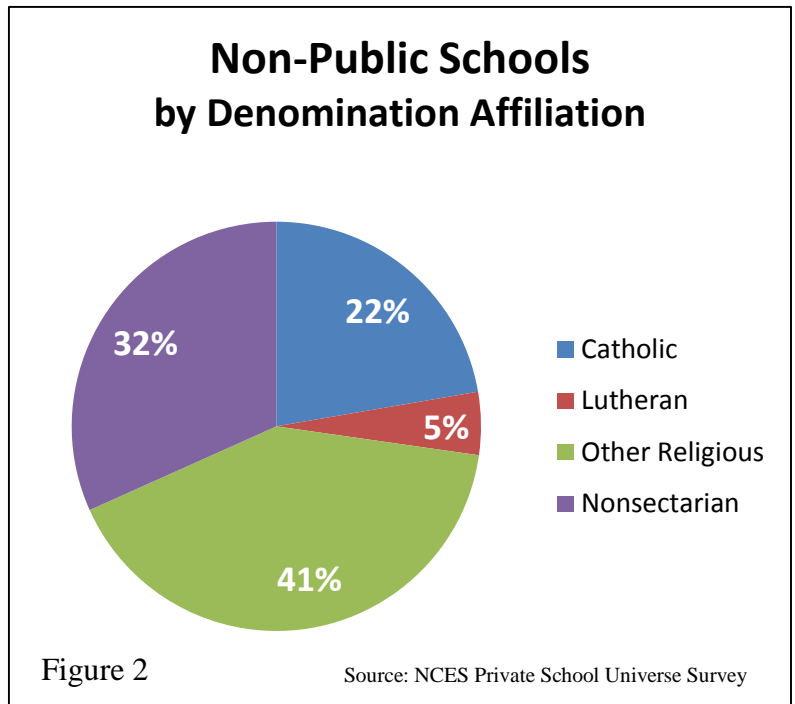
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## 2. Schools

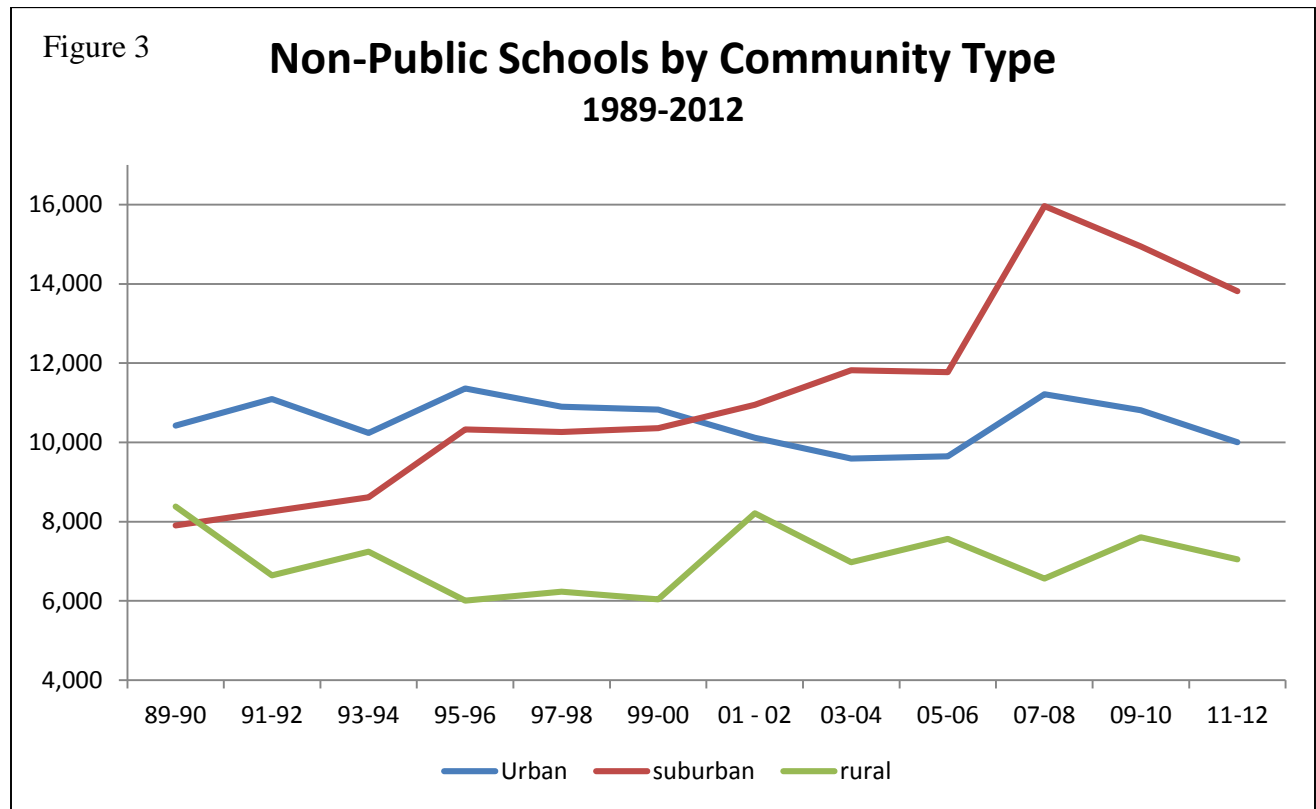


The number of non-public schools has been declining sharply since 2008. Figure 1 illustrates the shift from a mostly increasing trend during the 1990s and early 2000s to an abrupt downward trend about 2008. This data describes all non-public schools, including Lutheran schools and those affiliated with other religious denominations as well as non-sectarian schools. Figure 2 describes the religious affiliation of nonpublic schools, with “Lutheran” including the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and other Lutheran.

The location of nonpublic schools has also seen a shift in recent decades. Figure 3 illustrates the recent



trend toward more schools being located in suburban areas as opposed to urban areas. Schools in rural areas remain the smallest portion of nonpublic schools over time.

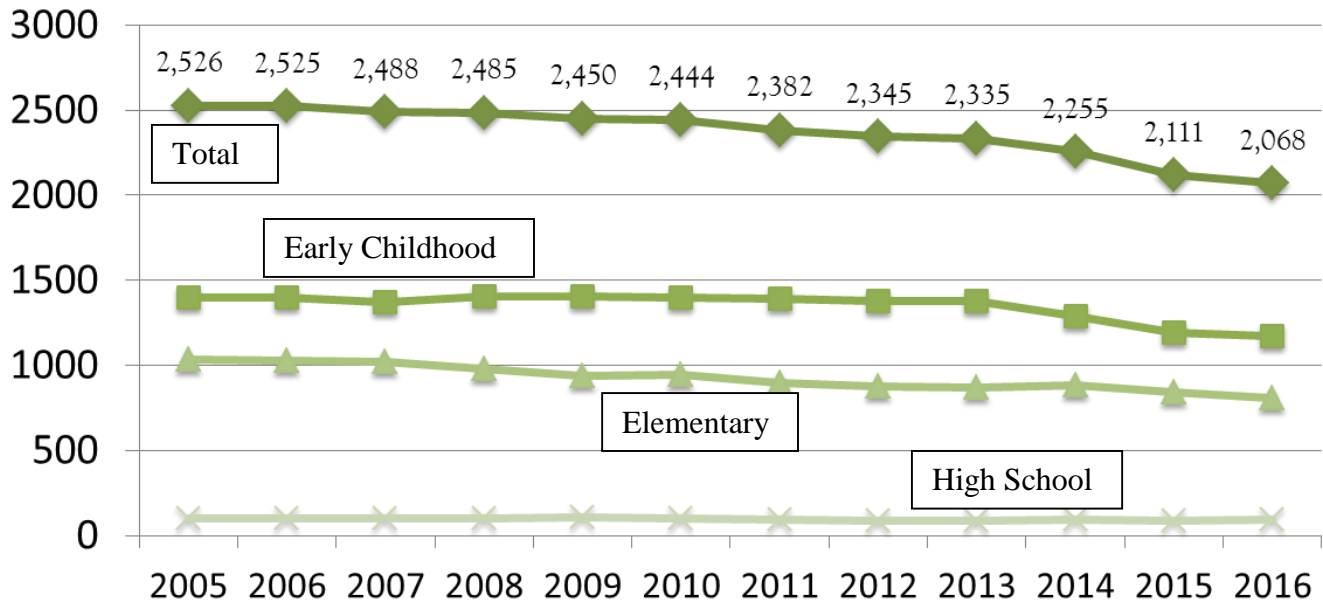


Source: NCES Private School Universe Survey

Lutheran schools have seen steady declines in numbers, similar to all other non-public schools. We refer to the LCMS data here because it is the most complete set available from all of the Lutheran systems. Figure 4 shows the total number of LCMS schools declining from 2005 to the present day. Early childhood centers have long made up the largest portion of LCMS schools. Over half of all LCMS schools today serve early childhood age students, as illustrated in Figure 5. Our interviews with system leaders from the ELCA and WELS reveal a similar trend of early childhood centers making up the largest portion of schools, elementary schools comprising a slightly smaller portion, and very few high schools.

Figure 4

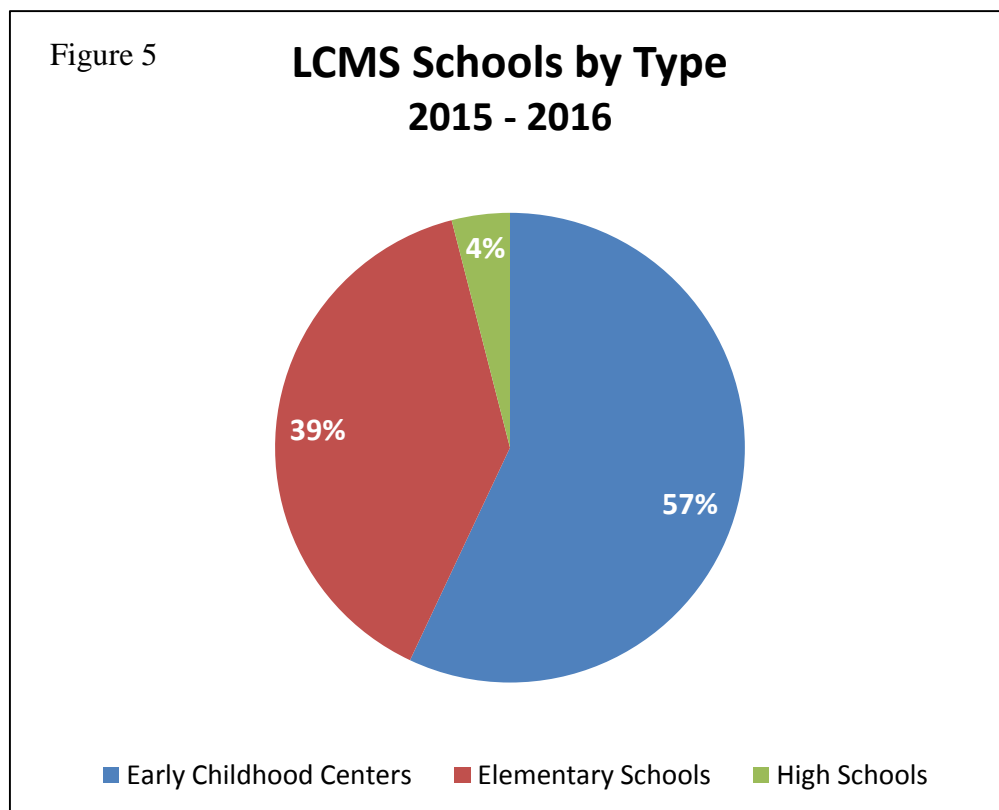
## LCMS Schools by Type 2005 - 2016



Source: LCMS Statistics Analysis Report 2016

Figure 5

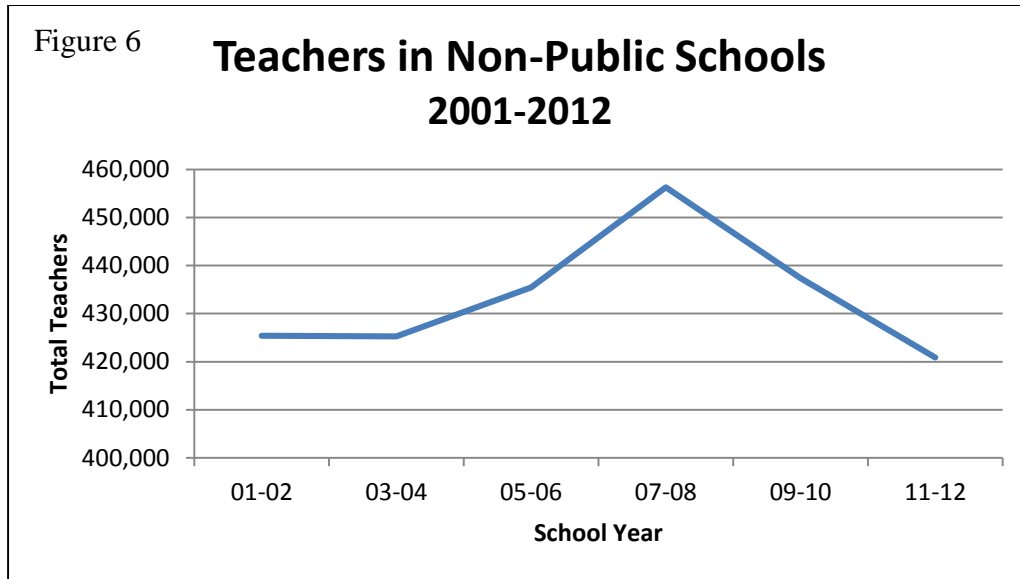
## LCMS Schools by Type 2015 - 2016



Source: LCMS Statistics Analysis Report 2016

### 3. Teachers

As with schools, we see a sharp decline in the number of teachers in non-public schools beginning around 2008. Figure 6 shows number of full time equivalent teachers in all non-public schools from 2001-2012.



Source: NCES Private School Universe Survey

There are approximately 40,000 teachers in LCMS, ELCA, and WELS Lutheran schools today. In the LCMS, a roster system is used to determine a teacher’s status with relation to the denomination’s governing body. Those on the roster have been trained in an LCMS university and agree to uphold the values and beliefs held by the denomination, whereas those who are not on the roster may have been trained at any university. Historically the LCMS enjoyed an established pipeline of LCMS-trained and rostered teachers, but recently the trend has moved toward a majority of non-rostered educators active in schools today (Figure 7). In the WELS system an established pipeline of WELS trained teachers still exists; 90% of teachers are trained at WELS universities.

<b>Lutheran School Statistics by Denomination 2015-2016</b>			
	<b>Schools</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>LCMS</b>	2068	19,938	191,340
<b>ELCA</b>	1,500	18,000	200,000
<b>WELS</b>	742	2377	41,138



During focus groups and interviews, a majority of participants mentioned the high quality and exceptional dedication of teachers in nonpublic schools. Focus group and interview participants described teaching staff as “quality, caring, people of faith, people who teach character and values, Christ-centered, and family-oriented.” Teachers are more easily able to meet specialized needs and provide

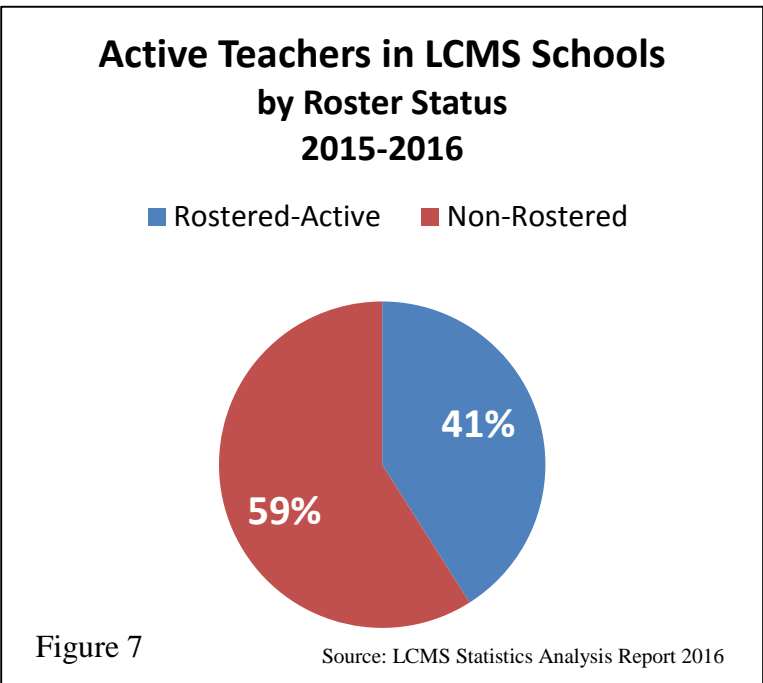
one-on-one attention in non-public schools. Teachers at a nonpublic school are also more likely to be united around the same goal and mission statement, so children receive a consistent message about values and worldview, rather than hearing competing ideologies from each

different teacher. However, our focus group and interview participants also noted the difficulty of finding and maintaining the type of teachers they desire on staff. According to Joe McTighe, Executive Director of the Council for American Private Education, “the challenge is not only finding a qualified candidate, but finding a qualified candidate whose values or religious belief system align with the school.”

*“The challenge is not only finding a qualified candidate, but finding a qualified candidate whose values or religious belief system align with the school.”*

-Joe McTighe, Executive Director, CAPE

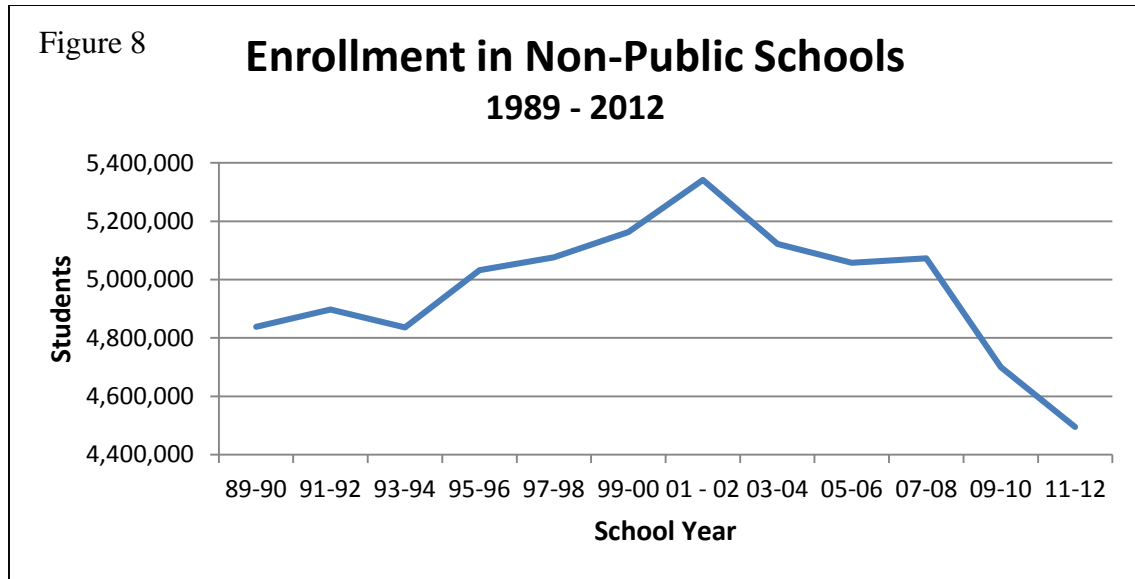
Teachers in our focus groups brought up significant needs in many areas of training, both before they enter a classroom and throughout their career in the form of professional development opportunities. One of the most prevalent issues mentioned is a need for more resources or training in the area of relating to and supporting parents due to changes in parenting practices and the increased expectations placed on teachers by parents. Many teachers feel a strong need to educate and provide resources to parents to improve their understanding of their role in the life skills education and character development of the student.



An equally prevalent theme was the need for more, better, or more comprehensive training for teachers before they entered their first job. Longer student teaching opportunities or more multi-dimensional skill set training were mentioned as needs. Help learning to serve students individually on a wide variety of levels and finding more opportunities to use technology effectively were also mentioned as professional development needs. Teachers also noted facing new challenges in recent years in helping students address the effects of poverty, violence in the community, and other stressful situations students experience outside school.

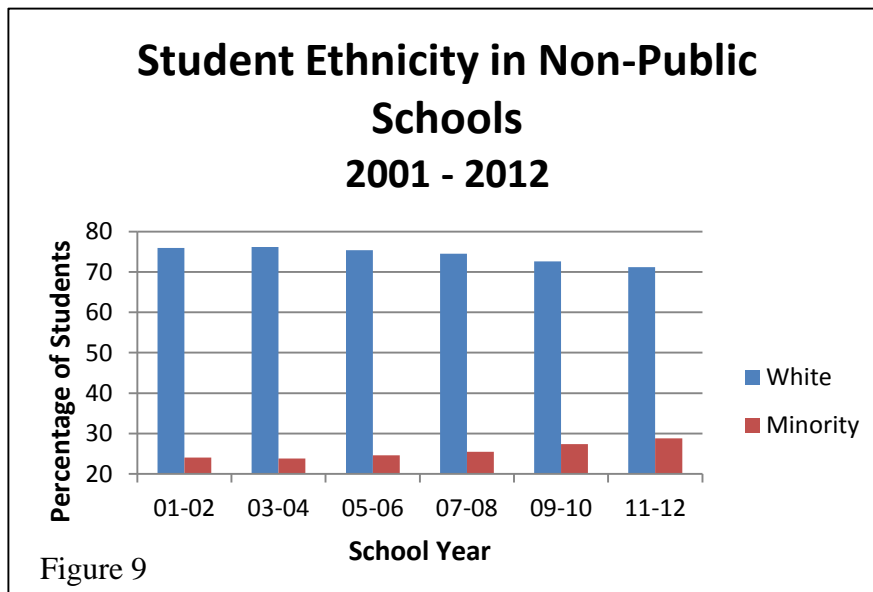
## 4. Students

Enrollment in nonpublic schools has declined sharply in recent decades, driving the decline in the number of schools discussed above. Figure 8 shows the number of students enrolled from 1989 – 2012.



Source: NCES Private School Universe Survey

During the same time period that total enrollment has been declining, non-white students have contributed to total enrollment in slightly larger percentages while white students have contributed slightly less to total enrollment (Figure 9). Minority students include Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and students of two or more races. While quantitative data is not yet available for more recent years, our qualitative research suggests that this trend toward more minority students in non-public schools is continuing.



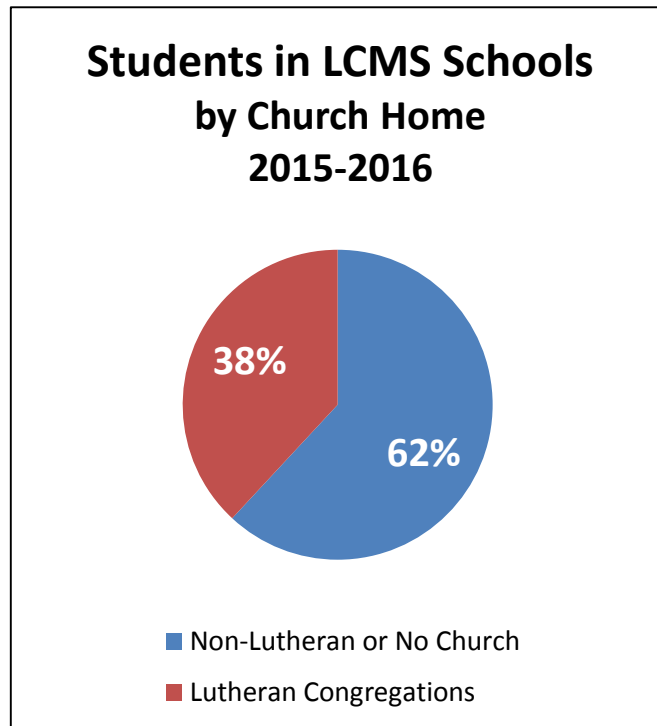
Source: NCES Private School Universe Survey

Figure 10

Source: LCMS Statistics Analysis Report 2016

Lutheran school systems like the LCMS are serving more and more non-Lutheran or unchurched families than ever before. In past years most Lutheran schools were filled with the children of members from the adjoining church. Today, as figure 10 illustrates, the large majority of students in LCMS schools come from other denominations or have no church home at all.

The most prevalent theme mentioned by teachers in our focus groups was that of a changing student



body with increasing levels of need in learning basic life skills, and parents with new and different expectations of the roles of teachers in student's lives. Teachers say that they are tasked not only with teaching academics, but also with meeting the increasingly high expectations placed upon them by parents and students. Teachers often feel at odds with parents and feel the need to defend and explain their methods, while in the past this was not as much of an issue. Teachers are seeking new ways to improve working relationships with parents and to resource and equip them to provide a better structure for students at home.

## 5. The Value of Non-Public Education

Parents and guardians of school- age children have many reasons for choosing a nonpublic school. Our qualitative research revealed a large variety of answers to the question “why do parents choose your nonpublic school?” The two most popular themes were the

*“For many parents it’s more about the values taught [at a Lutheran school], such as interacting well socially with others, than the faith aspect of the education.”*

-Gayle Denny,  
Executive Director,  
ELEA

opportunity to receive a faith- based education, and the access to high quality, specialized teachers and services to meet individual needs with smaller class sizes. While most faith- based schools identify the faith education component of their school as a central “selling point”, many parents are more focused on the values that are taught as a result of the faith background, rather than the faith itself. According to Gayle Denny, Executive Director of the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association, “for many parents it’s more about the values taught [at a Lutheran school], such as interacting well socially with others, than the faith aspect of the education.”

Many respondents also mentioned a “family atmosphere” as drawing them to choose a nonpublic school. Teachers, parents, staff, and students are seen as caring for one another in an extraordinary way in many nonpublic schools. One focus group respondent mentioned a difficult situation between staff and parents that was handled with love and care, and improved those relationships throughout the school. The heavy use of technology in effective ways for learning was also a theme we heard about the value of nonpublic schools. Safety in the school setting was mentioned primarily in urban areas as a point of distinction as well.

## 6. Opportunities for Future Impact

When asked about the greatest opportunity that is emerging for their school’s future impact, teachers and administrators in focus groups mentioned chances to shape the character of students positively and to see increased academic successes. Teachers, administrators, and nearly all of the national systems leaders interviewed mentioned a common theme of the opportunity to

*“[A Lutheran preschool] may be the only exposure to the Gospel that these families have”.*

-Gayle Denny,  
Executive Director,  
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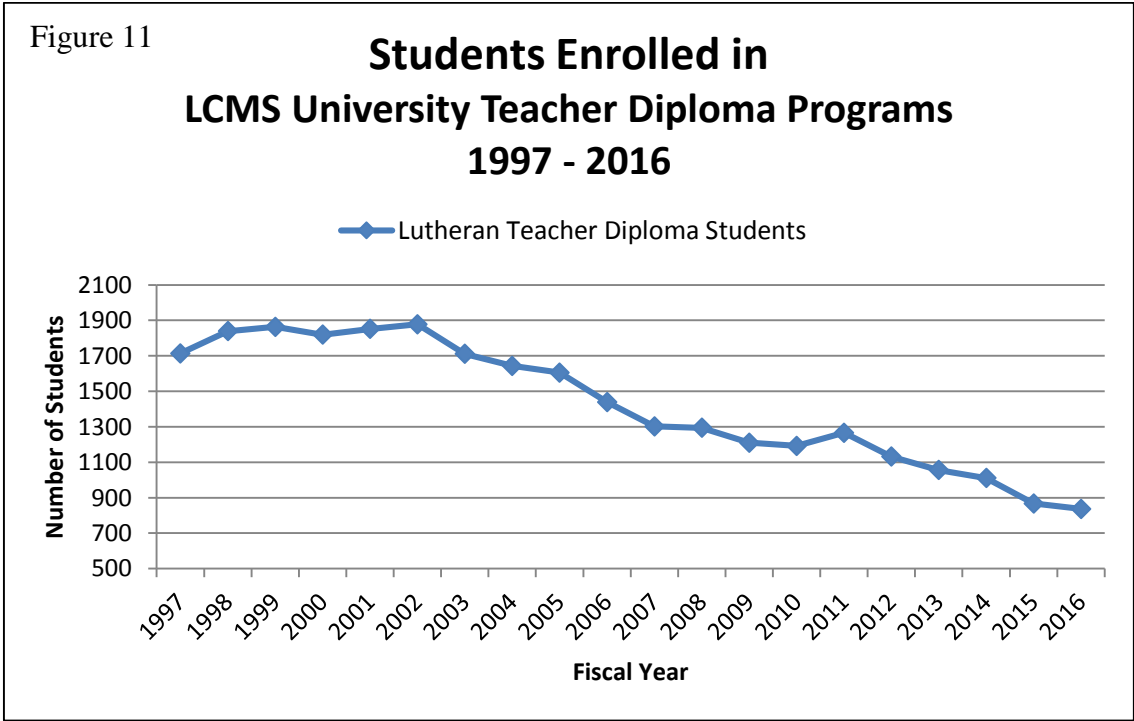
reach out to more people in the community and new demographics by expanding or offering additional services. Gayle Denny, Executive Director of ELEA, hopes to see more early childhood centers expand from providing only half day care to offering full day care for children. Denny sees opportunities to provide care for working parents and families as very important; stating that for many “a [Lutheran preschool] may be the only exposure to the Gospel that these families have”. Terry Schmidt, Director of LCMS Schools, mentioned

“3toPhD”, a new public- private collaborative school model created in part by Concordia University Portland with extensive wraparound services such as tutoring, health and nutrition assistance for a vulnerable community, as “astounding progress for Lutheran schools”. In the Catholic system, Tom Burnford, Interim President of the National Catholic Education Association, hopes to see increasing outreach and marketing toward the expanding Latino population in the US.

## 7. Challenges

The top challenge mentioned in our qualitative research was that of finding and retaining qualified, excellent leaders and teaching staff in schools. With many leaders of schools late in their careers and not enough newly educated leaders to follow in their footsteps, Terry Schmidt, Director of Schools for the LCMS, notes, “Not many leaders are stepping into these roles; we have a leadership gap coming in the next 15-20 years.” The supply of qualified teachers is also a concern in many contexts. The LCMS is seeing fewer and fewer graduates with required teaching credentials specific to the LCMS system and theology (Figure 11). The WELS system continues to be able to maintain a pipeline of WELS trained educators. Jim Rademan, WELS Director of Lutheran Schools, shares that 90% of WELS teachers were trained in WELS higher education institutions. Catholic schools have much less rigorous requirements for theological education for their teachers who teach non-religion subjects, easing the concern of the teacher pipeline.

*“Not many leaders are stepping into these roles; we have a leadership gap coming in the next 15-20 years.”*  
 - Terry Schmidt, LCMS Director of Schools



Source: Concordia University System Statistics

*“The government is increasingly defining how things are to be done [in non-public schools] and creating more and more laws that redefine things that were once thought to be fundamental.”*

- Tom Burnford, Interim President, NCEA

Leaders of national systems of schools brought up changing government regulations and government interventions in non-public schools as a challenge. Tom Burnford, Interim President of the National Catholic Education Association, shared his concerns about increasing government involvement in non-public schools in this way: “The government is increasingly defining how things are to be done [in non-public schools] and creating more and more laws that redefine things that were once thought to be fundamental.” The NCEA and

other national groups like CAPE plan to increase their work in the area of policy advocacy for parental choice legislation in the future. Declining enrollment trends and the resulting financial sustainability challenges were also mentioned by national systems leaders, administrators, and teachers alike. Leaders and staff are always looking for new and different sources and models of funding to combat declining enrollment numbers and tuition revenue.

Among teachers the biggest challenge cited was the changing home environments and family situations from which many students are coming to school. Parents have different expectations for teachers than they did in the past. Teachers feel that their role is misunderstood, and even feel the need to defend their actions and methods to parents because “the student is always right” in the parent’s eyes. This becomes a challenge in the classroom as teachers are not prepared or resourced to provide the increasingly expected amounts of basic life skills, emotional, and social education of students in addition to teaching the academic curriculum. Teachers stated that they need more professional development options and resources focused on addressing the needs of parents and improving relationships with parents to help them understand their roles better and increase the amount of life skills training students receive at home. Teachers are also looking for resources and help addressing the needs of students in poverty, students with stressful home environments, and students facing trauma or violence in their community.



## 8. The Future of Nonpublic Education

In our interviews with national systems leaders, we asked, “What are your predictions for the future trends in the way your organization operates and the people you serve?” Responses were varied, from hopes for changing legislation regarding non-public schools to finding creative new ways to deliver education. The one response we did not hear was plans of continuing to operate as in the past. The context of non-public education is changing rapidly in many ways. A sense of agility and innovation will mark the successful non-public schools of the future.

There were many mentions of possible changes in school choice or educational tax credits legislation. Some leaders plan to focus more efforts on advocacy, hoping to see parents gain more autonomy in the decision of where to send their children to school. There is some hesitancy, however, about school choice legislation due to the restrictions that can be placed upon government funds that are channeled directly to a school. Terry Schmidt of the LCMS mentioned his concerns in this area, pointing out the possibility that faith-based schools could be forced to comply with regulations that did not align with their values and beliefs in order to receive government funding. NCEA leader Tom Burnford echoes these concerns, pointing out that faith-based schools could be considered an inappropriate direct recipient of government funds altogether, simply because they teach religion in addition to academics. Educational tax credits offer much more autonomy to parents since funding comes in the form of a tax credit directly to the individual tax payer, who can then decide to use the funds in any way they wish.

There are many creative new options for delivering faith-based education into the future, including online schooling, homeschooling cooperatives, and charter schools with wraparound services that include faith formation. Charter schools remain a controversial approach in many contexts. Some leaders feel that losing the opportunity to provide faith formation during the school day results in a faith-based school losing its identity and connection to the church. Many view charter schools as “part of the problem” in relation to the decline in the quality of other public schools, viewing the church’s task as supporting all public schools rather than running schools of their own. Others see a former church-school building transformed into a public charter school as a great alternative option to the church operating the school, pointing out that there are even more opportunities for the church to maintain and build community relationships by providing before and after care, including faith formation, to students and families that would not otherwise have any connections to a church.

## 9. Reflections and Questions for Further Research

Schools, teachers, and leaders in non-public and Lutheran education today are facing:

- declines in enrollment numbers,
- financial struggles,
- shortages of qualified teachers and leaders,
- new expectations from a changing population of parents and students, and
- increasing new regulations from the government.

In order to face these challenges and emerge as impactful education providers in the future, organizations and schools are seeking:

- new sources of funding,
- opportunities to increase enrollment among new demographics,
- advocacy for legislation that encourages maximum autonomy of parent choice,
- more resources to help teachers address a changing population and their expectations, and
- more teacher and administrator candidates who align with the school's values.

Those who seek to support the success of Lutheran and non-public schools must answer these questions:

- What new training and education opportunities could we provide to address the shortage of qualified, values- aligned leaders and teachers?
- How can we best equip teachers and staff to meet changing needs in an accessible way?
- What new models for funding will ensure the financial sustainability of our education systems?
- How can we serve more students and families and become accessible to new demographics?
- How can we best interact with government regulations that affect our schools?
- How do we adapt to changing realities while maintaining our faith identity?

These areas of further research will point to new ideas and solutions to support a vibrant and impactful future for Lutheran and non-public schools and the communities they serve.

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