

# Lutheran Education & Lutherans Educating

## Introduction

A compelling reality now confronting and even threatening the Christian school movement is that many schools are struggling and dying, largely due to lack of funding. This is particularly so in the case of schools targeting and serving poor, urban, minority, and educationally vulnerable children. These Christian schools have provided a much needed alternative to the failing public school education that is at the center of much national discourse currently. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, between the 1999-2000 and 2005-2006 school years, the K-12 faith-based education sector lost nearly 1,200 schools and almost 425,000 students. Urban Christian schools are hemorrhaging to death due primarily to the slow exodus of students whose families can no longer afford the cost of educating them and the inability of schools to continue to compensate for the gap in received income and actual educational cost.

Many (if not most) Christian schools exist to nurture children from Christian homes through a Biblically-based curriculum led by Christian educators. These schools see one of their primary functions is to help students become spiritually transformed through explicit discipleship. Their doors are opened to children from Christian homes in order to partner with parents, to reinforce the values and principles instilled in the home. As such, they see themselves in a sheltering, nurturing, and supporting role as an extension of the home. These schools, however, are often financially and geographically out of reach for the nation's most needy children. Viable traditional Christian education continues to elude the majority of the urban poor.

The fundamental challenge facing God's educators today is how to bring a Christ-honoring influence to bear on disadvantaged children at a time when traditional Christian schooling continues to struggle and/or be inaccessible. Currently, there are more than 20,000,000 poor students in this nation, 41% of all students. This number has been growing considerably since the Johnson administration thrust the Federal government into education as the centerpiece of its war on poverty. **It is estimated that faith-based schools are serving less than 1% of this student population.** Even more sadly, that percentage is declining. This is in stark contrast to Christ's example and the mandate for believers that education of the poor should be both fundamental and foundational to Christian schooling.

## The Need

**URBAN** children (**U**nder **R**esourced, **B**ehind **A**cademically or **N**on-white [children of color]) face a crisis of unparalleled proportion in this nation's history. These emerging students are *under-parented, under-educated, under-prepared, and under-resourced*. As a result, they will not lend themselves to being educated in a traditional, business-as-usual fashion. This new generation requires a new educational approach if they are going to be equipped to function successfully and effectively in society.

### ***They Are Under-Parented***

According to the last Census report, 70% of all children born in 2007 were born to single parents. Nearly one of three Latino children and two of three African-American children are growing up in single parent homes. This is also now the case for one of four Caucasian children. The demise of the two-parent family structure is wreaking havoc on the lives of many of these young people.

*Since parental involvement impacts education, it is no wonder that under-parented children are being under-educated and among the least educated in society.*

### ***They Are Under-Educated***

This nation spends over \$400 billion each year on education. This is more per capita than at any time in history. Yet there is little return on investment. Unacceptable little and slow progress is being made in closing the achievement gap and providing URBAN children with a high quality education. While non-URBAN children are being educated, URBAN children are simply being schooled. This can be illustrated by a very simple formula:

$$\text{Education} = \text{Teaching} + \text{Learning}$$

$$\text{Schooling} = \text{Teaching} - \text{Learning}$$

*While a part of the problem is attributable to anemic learning structures, a large portion of the problem is due to the fact that URBAN children start school and matriculate through school with an anemic learning foundation.*

### ***They Are Under-Prepared***

Sadly, despite the nation's gallant efforts to address the educational plight of URBAN children through "No Child Left Behind" and other education reform efforts, these children continue to perform dismally and lag behind academically. Even at the preschool level, one-third to half of African-American and Latino students test in the bottom quarter of students in reading, math, and general knowledge (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 130). These students start out behind and remain behind during their entire schooling until they eventually check out mentally or drop out physically. The reason so many (in fact, the majority) of these children struggle to learn is that they have an anemic learning foundation. That is to say, they are not inherently slow or poor learners, but they do not have the cognitive tools necessary for effective learning. Without proper cognitive skills, learning is difficult, if not impossible. These skills are the foundation of all learning.

*Correcting the problems of academic deficiencies requires resources many URBAN families simply do not possess.*

### ***They Are Under-Resourced***

According to the last Census report, more than 20,000,000 economically poor students qualify for free and reduced lunch. This represents 41% of all students nationally ...nearly every other child!

This presents an educational challenge of unparalleled magnitude. Since education is a purchased commodity, the caliber of the education a child receives is usually dependent on the purchasing power their parents possess. Resource-deficient children throughout the nation start school behind and matriculate behind other children because their parents do not possess the resources to secure a quality, effective education for them.

## **The Biblical Rationale**

Beginning with Christ's first public address to His discourse about the final judgment, addressing the plight of the poor and disadvantaged was at the heart of what Jesus did, said, and instructed His followers to do:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.*  
(Luke 4:18-19)

*For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.* (Matthew 25:35-36)

The Holy Scriptures are replete with how central the plight of the poor and disadvantaged are to the Lord. And it is not just a New Testament position. Consider what the Lord said to King Josiah's son:

*He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. "Is that not what it means to know Me?" declares the Lord.* (Jer. 22:15-16)

Jesus also commands His followers to:

*Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them...(Matthew 19:14)*

Finally, there is a strong warning in Scripture for showing partiality against the poor.

*Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man.* (James 2:5-6)

Looking at the pattern of Christ, given that He cares about the education of children, He certainly cares about the education of the poor. Hence, Christian schooling should most certainly have godly educators highly engaged in the education of under-resourced and under-served children. Those children who rank among "the least of these" factor so highly with Christ that His people will be assessed by what they do in reference to educating them. If the educational approach to these children is limited to Christian schooling as it is currently practiced, then the potential for educating them Biblically for Christ is also limited and declining.

## **AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION/STRATEGY**

### **1. Strengthen existing Lutheran schools serving URBAN children**

- a. These schools serve a low resource population
- b. These schools are under-resourced
- c. These schools need support

### **2. Start new public schools led by Lutherans**

- a. Faith-friendly
- b. Faith-led
- c. Publically funded
- d. For the first time in the history of modern education, people of faith have the opportunity to start and run public schools
  - i. Shape the culture of the schools
  - ii. Provide a values-based education

URBAN children must be given an affordable, accessible education that instructs, inspires, and influences them. That is, an effective education for them must be academically excellent, values-based, and character shaping. Schools are needed today that will engage in high quality education that is transformational in nature. These schools are characterized by five attributes (The FACTS):

- **F**unding (Under-resourced children require more resources to learn effectively)
- **A**ssessment based instruction (CASA's model) (Student Academic Assimilation)
- **C**ognitive skills assessment and training (Brain Skills)
- **T**ransformational teaching that is values-based
- **S**tudent Achievement (based on national and state standards)

Instead of viewing the charter school movement as adversarial and a threat, we should see the opportunity it presents. ***The charter school movement represents an opportunity for principled, values-conscious people to access the resources of and have an influence in public schools unlike any other time in the history of modern public education.***

Public schools have historically been started by school districts and the heads of those schools have been appointed by district superintendents. Furthermore, in recent decades, as public schools have become increasingly values-neutral and faith-hostile, this has left a void in many children that is often filled in ways that contribute to the ills, rather than the good, of society. That has now changed. Individuals interested in and committed to restoring principled values in the public sector can start and run public schools and set the culture of these schools. They can provide high quality education and engage in life-on-life transformational teaching, the real force behind effective schooling. Ultimately, socially conscious, principled people can give hope and the promise of a better life through an affordable, quality, private school-like education to children who have become all too acquainted with hopelessness and despair.

### 3. Sanction Lutherans educators teaching in urban settings

God's people (and particularly His educators) have the opportunity and potential to impact the lives of the students they teach and touch each day by engaging in transformational living and teaching. By doing so, His people can make a "salt and light" impact on the students entrusted to their care. Currently, the people of God are educating untold numbers of students throughout this nation. There are people of God who are administrators and teachers in every educational institution in this nation where poor and disadvantaged (URBAN) children are being educated. These Christian educators are ready and able to be mobilized for optimum impact. They can and should be supported as they serve with excellence by engaging in life-transforming ministry in their current work assignments.

Enabling and equipping Christian educators serving URBAN children, regardless of where they are serving, in addition to serving Christian schools, could multiply ACSI's impact on the education of students in the most need. Such equipping would include providing Christian teachers with skills to engage in transformational life-on-life instruction that is:

- Intentional – engaging the hearts and minds of children to prepare them for life and build academic skills through a strategic plan of action.
- Incarnational – educating children through consideration of their circumstances, thoughtful engagement, and committed relationships and mentoring.
- Inspirational – employing spiritual resources including the work of the Holy Spirit, the strength of community, the power of prayer, and the principles from the Word of God to inform decisions and school design and build hope and confidence in students. For example, which fruit of the Holy Spirit cannot be lived out in the public square?

By doing so, these teachers become living curriculum of the love and values of Christ in the classroom ... no matter the setting.