

# Member Tuition Bane or Blessing

*By Ronald Heins*

Tuition has become a hot topic among many of our WELS congregations during the past few years. Some WELS elementary schools started with tuition, but that practice is relatively new in the Midwest.

*“Parents and congregations  
need to practice  
what they teach.”*

Can tuition be a blessing, or will it have the opposite effect? Is it a solution to the press for dollars, or is it a fleeting financial aid that will only undermine stewardship? Will it make the partnership between church and home stronger or will it hurt that relationship? Will tuition make congregations back off their responsibility to carry out the Lord’s directive to nurture their youth? These are valid questions and honest concerns as God’s people seek to carry out his will in our changing world.

All of these questions fall into the area of Christian judgment, not Christian doctrine. God has neither mandated full-time Christian schools nor given specific direction how to fund schools. Instead, our God gave us a mission. His mission is clear: use the Word to train and equip the next generation so that they serve their Savior in this life while clinging to the hope of eternal life. Scripture speaks frequently about this work and emphasizes its importance. Jesus’ words to Peter, “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15), demonstrate the value of the spiritual training of children.

An informal study of WELS and LCMS congregations in the Milwaukee area revealed the following: (1) What schools and churches teach about parental responsibility for their children’s Christian education differs from what those schools and churches actually practice. (2) Some congregations rush into a tuition program to solve a budget crisis without proper debate and careful planning—a sure way to allow Satan some room to work.

## **Matching our words and actions<sup>1</sup>**

Experience says that congregations would benefit from a discussion of tuition. Three theses drive that conclusion. The first is: “Parents and congregations need to practice what they teach.” If we want God to bless our Lutheran schools, parents and congregations need to match their actions with their words regarding each one’s responsibilities.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that offering free Christian education to parents communicates that they have no spiritual responsibility for their children, or worse yet, that a distinctly Christian education is not important. In other words, our actions are contradicting our words. The result? The role of parents and the role of the school and congregation become fuzzy. To continue this confusion endangers our God-given mission.

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<sup>1</sup> **Lutheran Schools** (God) has not given you your children and the means to support them simply so that you may do with them as you please or train them just to get ahead in the world. You have been earnestly commanded to raise them for God’s service . . . . Luther’s Works, American Edition, Vol. 46.

The Lord charges parents, not congregations, with the primary role in training their children (“Fathers...bring them up in the in the training and instruction of the Lord” [Ephesians 6:4ff.]). That leads us to ask four questions:

1. What responsibility do parents have for the spiritual instruction of their children, and what responsibility does the church have?
2. What spiritual maturity do parents need to carry, out this charge, and how are we encouraging their growth toward that maturity?
3. How much time do we expect parents to give to help the school?
4. What financial responsibility to the church do parents have in addition to their support of other areas of the Lord’s work?

Conversations with parents reveal that most do not clearly understand their responsibilities or the responsibilities of the church and school. Also, when some parents are asked what they are doing for the spiritual training of their children, they say: “That is the school’s work.” We, as congregations and schools, need to be careful that our practice does not contribute to those parents’ incorrect beliefs.

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### **Quality Christian training essential**

The second thesis is: “Quality Christian schools are needed more today than at any other time in our century.” Our children are growing up in a culture that no longer reinforces Christian values. Because of broken homes and a mobile society, children have fewer people around to support them. Schools help fill the need for that support. That growing need for Christian schools comes at a time when our congregations face serious financial problems. This tension causes some to cut back their schools, some to limit enrollment, or some even to consider closing the school. These problems surface at a time when the costs of operating a school are growing faster than inflation.

### **Schools in a parish’s self-interest**

The third thesis is: “Our congregations need to provide spiritual care to more people than ever before.” Because of the changes in families and in our society, our parishes need to provide spiritual care to more people than ever before. Think of the struggling homes, broken families, emotionally and spiritually bent kids and adults. These troubles, added to counseling needs and mission opportunities, are causing some congregations to consider adding to their pastoral staff. How do we balance all the work the Lord is giving us? There are no easy answers.

If we accept these three theses, then it seems that some congregations would benefit from considering charging tuition for member children just as our Lutheran high schools have for decades.

### **Bane or blessing**

Experience demonstrates that tuition can be a blessing when parents assume a greater amount of responsibility for supporting the spiritual growth of their children. The income from tuition serves well when it helps congregations pay the expenses of operating their school as an effective tool for spiritual nurture. When the members of a congregation consciously maintain a balance between the work the Lord has given them

within their congregation as well as the mission work in other parts of our country and the world, tuition fees have served the church's mission well.

Initiating tuition is beneficial when it is done over a three to four year period along with a commitment from the congregation to provide 2/3 of the support for the school. This approach is combined with limits on the number of children a family has to pay for and with safety nets of forgiveness for those who are not able pay the tuition. If the entire congregation sees gains for its school and for the work of the Lord as a result of the change, moving toward tuition support for Lutheran elementary schools has been a blessing.

Experience also shows that tuition can be a bane if a congregation institutes tuition too quickly. A parish thus fails to discuss God's purpose for their congregation or think carefully through all the issues. The members are given too little time to state their opinions.

Experience proves that tuition is not a blessing when it is initiated only to solve budget crises. Tuition that is instituted to get at parents whose contributions do not cover the cost of their kids hurts a congregation. When it is used to lower the importance of the school or as a substitute for faithful, ongoing, stewardship education, tuition hurts rather than helps. Tuition charges are a bane for congregations that do not also teach parents the priceless value of a distinctively Christian education.

*Consider this issue carefully  
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### **Consider carefully, lovingly**

The bottom line? Consider this issue carefully and in Christian love. Charging tuition for members' children is a major change for most. You will want to evaluate the unique traditions of each congregation. If you decide to study the issue, avoid the pitfalls of haste and bad motivation.

If you decide not to charge tuition for member children, be sure the message you think you are sending is the message you actually send. In a day when "free" connotes valueless, it is common to find "free" schools having less parental involvement and more indifference than those that charge tuition.

Whichever decision you make, the mission Christ gives his church needs to remain in the forefront of all such decisions. Starting tuition is neither automatically beneficial nor automatically harmful. Among some of our churches, it has been a blessing. And in a few, it caused problems.

This writer has favored tuition in recent years as a tool for teaching the interlocking responsibilities of home and church. Tuition has enabled some congregations and schools to do things they deemed necessary, sustaining effective ministry rather than cutting it. Pray to the Lord for his wisdom for your church.