

PERSPECTIVES ON WELS SCHOOLS IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

By Evan Kolander

“It’s not the end of the world, but you can see it from here,” is how one longtime Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) teacher described Lutheran school ministry in the Pacific Northwest (PNW).¹ The states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho compose the PNW region. Sometimes, Alaska, along with portions of California, Montana, and Canada, are also included. For this paper, the term “PNW” will refer to the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska since those are the states included in the WELS Pacific Northwest District.²

The western frontier of the United States has a reputation for being free-thinking, and yet, or perhaps because of this, it is shockingly irreligious. A 2014 table of U.S. states revealing the population percentage of religious “nones” shows the PNW to be composed of the states with the third, fifth, seventh, and eleventh highest such populations.³ Historically speaking, religion has always been a complex issue in the region. Consider Oregon passing a law in 1922 that required all children between the ages of 6 and 18 to attend a public school. In effect, this would destroy private (religious) schools in Oregon. The broader nativist movement, which saw Catholics and their schools as un-American, influenced the passage of this law. Lutherans were also a target, with their propensity to preach and teach in German. With this nativism in mind, it is less surprising to discover that the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was one of the groups pushing for the passage of this law.⁴ Fascinatingly, though, at this same time, the KKK was also in favor of

¹ John Rittierodt, interview by author, Tacoma, May 8, 2024.

² “WELS Twelve Districts,” WELS, accessed May 11, 2024, <https://synodadmin.welsrc.net/download-synodadmin/official-synod-reports/?wpdmdl=3263&ind=1470172059961>.

³ “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁴ Lloyd P. Jorgenson, “The Oregon School Law of 1922: Passage and Sequel,” *Catholic Historical Review* 54, no. 3 (October 1968): 457.

Oregon making Bible reading compulsory in public schools,⁵ perhaps due to a Christian nationalist slant or because they were trying to avoid the accusation that the law was anti-religion. Ultimately, Oregon never passed a law endorsing compulsory Bible reading, and the law requiring public school attendance was struck down in 1925 by the Supreme Court.⁶ Lutheran leaders saw the decision as a victory worth celebrating but warned church members that they must not give up the cause of the Christian day school, lest they “die a natural death.”⁷

As it was then, so it is now. The Christian day school is still of great importance. Lutherans cannot afford to be passive about their treasured heritage of providing Christian education. Any educator could give a great list of challenges that schools and teachers face. Any WELS educator could provide an even longer list, factoring in the role Satan plays in attacking Christian schools and students. However, listing of general grievances is not the goal of this paper. Instead, this paper aims to identify challenges and opportunities relatively unique to the PNW and examine how WELS schools in the PNW have responded to these challenges and opportunities by talking to the people who have lived through and are living through them. Such a study will reveal humble servants filled with God’s grace who have grappled with regional difficulties and embraced the school ministries they have been a part of for decades. The WELS schools in the PNW do not appear ready for a natural death just yet.

History of WELS Schools in the PNW

But first, the past. The Pacific Northwest District of the Wisconsin Synod has existed since 1918. However, the roots of the district extend almost three decades further back. In 1894,

⁵ Mark E. Braun, “What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools (Part II),” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 8.

⁶ Scott J. Meyer, “The Lutheran Parochial School: Dates, Documents, Events, People,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 125.

⁷ M., “Death of the Oregon School Law,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 22, no. 3 (July 1925): 216.

Pastor R. Wolff of St. Paul's Church in Tacoma, WA, joined the Wisconsin Synod (from now on referred to as "WELS"). St. Paul's would remain the only WELS church in the PNW until 1905 when a new congregation formed as Grace Church in Yakima, WA.⁸ Eventually, amidst the formation of The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States, discussions were held about what to do with the mission churches in the PNW. Suggestions ranged from combining them with the Dakota-Montana missions to turning them entirely over to the Missouri Synod. In the end, the Synod decided that the WELS churches in the PNW should become their own district, and that is what happened in 1918. The first district president was Pastor Fredr. Soll, from Grace in Yakima.⁹

Growth in the PNW was slow, but faithful ministers treasured their opportunities. By 1968, there were twenty-four WELS parishes in the district, served by nineteen pastors, along with, of particular note, three Christian day schools served by five teachers. The three schools belonged to Faith in Tacoma, Grace in Yakima, and Salem in Edmonds, WA.¹⁰ Only Faith is still operating a Lutheran elementary school (LES). Grace still offers preschool and kindergarten, but Salem Church and School has since closed.

The 1970s saw a period of growth for WELS schools in the PNW. In 1971, St. Matthew LES opened in Spokane, WA.¹¹ Also in the 1970s, Grace LES in Portland, OR opened.¹² Evergreen Lutheran High School (ELHS) opened in 1978 in DuPont, WA. (ELHS moved to its current location in Tacoma in 2012.) Holy Trinity LES opened in 1979 in Kent, WA.¹³ More was

⁸ William Lueckel, "History of the Pacific Northwest District" (1968): 3, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/3179>.

⁹ Lueckel, "History," 11-13.

¹⁰ Lueckel, "History," 22-24.

¹¹ "St. Matthew Lutheran Elementary School," St. Matthew's Spokane, accessed May 10, 2024, <https://school.stmatthewspokane.org/elementary-school.html>.

¹² Ryan Schmeling, phone call with author, May 12, 2024.

¹³ Jason Gibson, e-mail to the author, April 24, 2024.

to come. In 1984, Christ the King in Bremerton, WA, opened an LES.¹⁴ Grace Lutheran in Kenai, AK, opened its LES in 2001.¹⁵ Immanuel Lutheran opened an LES in 2002 in Salem, OR.¹⁶

All the schools previously mentioned, besides Grace Yakima and Salem Edmonds, are still open today. However, at various points since 1968, WELS congregations have also begun Christian day school ministries in Kennewick, WA, Bend, OR, and Bellevue, WA. These schools have not survived to the present.¹⁷

As of 2024, there are seven WELS elementary schools and one WELS high school operating in the PNW. These eight schools, along with three schools belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), comprise The Evergreen Lutheran School System (TELSS) and consider themselves partners in ministry.¹⁸ According to the TELSS Directory, the eight WELS schools have more than 60 teachers between them.¹⁹

About the Interviews and Survey Conducted

The author was excited to have the opportunity to sit down, in person, with three individuals with a wealth of experience as PNW residents and WELS educators. The first interviewee was Steph Rodmyre, who served at Holy Trinity in Kent from 1987 to 2014. The next interviewee was Dave Habeck, who served at ELHS from 1993 to 2010 and again from 2018 to the present. The final interviewee was John Rittierodt, who taught at multiple schools in

¹⁴ “About,” Christ the King Lutheran Church, accessed May 10, 2024, <https://ctk-wels.org/about>.

¹⁵ “Our History,” Grace Lutheran Church, accessed May 10, 2024, <https://www.gracelutherankenai.com/page/our-history>.

¹⁶ “Home,” Immanuel Salem, accessed May 10, 2024, <https://immanuelsalem.com/>

¹⁷ Rittierodt, interview.

¹⁸ “Partner Schools and Ministries,” Evergreen Lutheran High School, accessed May 11, 2014, <https://elhs.org/partners/>.

¹⁹ TELSS Directory accessible here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1e5KicOFDZkQBcgkicAzC9hFyiWYUlk6d/view?usp=drive_link.

the PNW from 1975 to 1990 and returned in the 2000s after spending time in California and Wisconsin.

In addition to conducting these three interviews, the author distributed a survey (see Appendix) to the current principals of the seven WELS Lutheran elementary schools and one WELS high school in the PNW District. As a courtesy, because the survey was sent out in April, which is close to the end of the school year, principals were given the choice of sending it out to their faculties. Only one chose to do so, but no members of that faculty responded. In total, three principals responded to the survey. The author sent the same survey to five individuals no longer serving in the District whom others had recommended to the author as people who could offer thoughtful viewpoints about school ministry in the PNW. All five of these individuals completed the survey. The five individuals represented eight different WELS PNW schools. All eight survey respondents have served in other WELS districts besides the PNW District, meaning they had strong points of reference when considering the survey questions. However, when put together, the eight survey respondents total over 100 years of experience in the PNW.²⁰

The reader should note that this paper does not claim to be all-inclusive. So that the focus of this paper can be narrow, some perspectives are missing. There are WELS churches in the PNW that do not have schools (some do have early childhood centers) and are facing some of the same challenges and opportunities as the schools, but they did not receive the survey. There are ELS churches and schools that are a part of the TELSS system, but they did not receive the survey. The author did not send the survey to any lay members. Still, the author believes that the perspectives included in this paper offer a qualitative summary of Lutheran life and school ministry in the PNW. However, there is much room to conduct further research.

²⁰ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey, conducted via Google Forms between April 23, 2024 and May 8, 2024.

Synthesis of Interviews and Survey on WELS Schools in the PNW

What are some general challenges facing WELS schools? “The cost of operating a Christian school has increased greatly due to many factors,” Jason Gibson, principal at Holy Trinity, mentioned.²¹ Chris Hintz, a current principal, has noticed that fewer families are volunteering to serve WELS schools and that “more and more families are looking for the school to serve as the main or only education provider, rather than assisting parents in the Christian education of their children.”²² Stan Cole, now retired, brought up that current teachers may have more difficulty remaining committed to their calls because they could be paid more and have fewer responsibilities somewhere else.²³ Nearly all respondents mentioned the great need for pastors and churches to support their local WELS schools. Gibson also highlighted the increasing pressures to “compromise policies and even Christian positions” as WELS schools bring in more and more non-member students.²⁴ To think this list of challenges has not even touched on those specific to the PNW!

So, what are those region-specific challenges? There are church members with “[h]ot [and] cold [attitudes]. Many [people] don’t have experience with WELS schools and are not necessarily committed to Christian education,” said Cole. Gibson had a similar refrain, “[members are] appreciative but a little complacent – we’re small and don’t have money, so it’s okay if this is the best we can do.”²⁵ Rittierodt also indicated that some congregations have little expectation of sending students to Lutheran schools, and others, primarily those whose schools no longer exist, thought the schools would quickly lead to filled pews in the church.²⁶

²¹ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

²² WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

²³ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

²⁴ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

²⁵ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

²⁶ Rittierodt, interview.

The pressing need for stronger finances is both a general and regional challenge. Greg Thiesfeldt, former ELHS principal, stated that “the lack of a state-supported voucher program impedes growth.”²⁷ Pastor Tom Unke commented that “ELHS has one of the smallest member bases of our area Lutheran high schools, so finances can be a struggle.”²⁸ Justin Eternick, principal at Grace Portland, has noticed the increased need for community outreach.²⁹ Habeck stated that “Lutheran has a meaning in the Midwest that it doesn’t in the PNW,” emphasizing that this is not a good thing and WELS schools have to work extra hard to promote conservative Lutheranism.³⁰ To his point, there are five different Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) synods in the same states that comprise the WELS PNW District.³¹ While this numerical disparity exists across the country, perhaps it is felt more deeply in a region like the PNW, where WELS roots do not run as wide and deep. The most recurring response was about the struggle to draw and retain called workers, who often have family in the Midwest. “It seems like few high-caliber, experienced teachers take calls here, and it’s hard to keep young, high-caliber teachers here,” noted Gibson.³² Rodmyre astutely added that distance from family not only creates a draw away from the PNW but also hampers the work while in the district, as teachers often struggle with loneliness.³³

Such challenges can, at times, feel overwhelming, but they often bring opportunities with them. The large number of unchurched families in the region is both a challenge and an opportunity. “It’s exciting to have so many ministry opportunities in such a diverse setting,”

²⁷ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

²⁸ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

²⁹ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

³⁰ Dave Habeck, interview by author, Tacoma, May 3, 2024.

³¹ “Home,” ELCA Region 1, accessed May 12, 2024, elcaregion1.org.

³² WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

³³ Steph Rodmyre, interview by author, Tacoma, April 25, 2024.

Gibson said.³⁴ In just the last two years, Hintz's church has brought four families into membership after they enrolled students in the school.³⁵ Thiesfeldt recalled "baptisms, new members..., and opportunities to share the Gospel with students from foreign countries."³⁶ "The fields are ripe," commented Hintz.³⁷

While some WELS schools in the PNW have closed over the years, there is still a thriving school ministry in the area. What has kept the present schools going? "God's blessings!" Cole explained. Another common refrain was the dedication and passion of called workers through the years. It may be a struggle to get and keep them in the PNW, but God indeed blesses their faithfulness. Pastor Unke was thankful for the "great harmony" that existed between high school teachers, elementary teachers, and pastors while he was in the district.³⁸

Regarding called workers, one cannot help but notice that while many leave the PNW relatively quickly, some are here for decades. Are there certain traits or attitudes that make a difference? Habeck praised those teachers who show "a dedication to the ministry and putting out a quality product."³⁹ Hintz mentioned that "PNW called workers need to have a strong desire to evangelize. They need to be outgoing and willing to talk to people about their previous church experiences, not just pass them off because they aren't WELS."⁴⁰ Thiesfeldt suggested, "The good ones (and most fit that description) were willing to wear many hats, gave generously of their time, and took great interest in the lives and well-being of their students."⁴¹ On a simpler note, Rodmyre pointed to the natural beauty of the PNW, saying, he "just loved it here." He did

³⁴ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

³⁵ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

³⁶ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

³⁷ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

³⁸ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

³⁹ Habeck, interview.

⁴⁰ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

⁴¹ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

however, remark that the workers who stayed for the long haul were those who “treated where they were as home” and were “eager to meet the challenge of unchurched people.”⁴²

Why does it matter that the WELS keeps investing in schools in the PNW? “They can be a light in a largely ungodly and unchurched society,” says Thiesfeldt.⁴³ Gibson, Hintz, and Eternick commented on many families seeking non-public education. Unke felt that “outreach via great schools” is among the best opportunities WELS ministries have in the PNW.⁴⁴ Rodmyre pointed out that “Lutheranism offers eternal life, for free, no strings attached.” There are plenty of people in the PNW who need to hear that. Rodmyre also brought up the need for the Synod to continually recruit workers from all over the country, pointing to pastors in the district who are ELHS alumni.⁴⁵ Interestingly, Gibson brought up accreditation as helping to set “a standard for excellence” to create environments that might better retain called workers and attract more families.⁴⁶ Considering the historical view that accreditation can be a dangerous thing for the Lutheran school to strive for,⁴⁷ the author feels compelled to credit WELS School Accreditation (WELSSA) with helping to turn accreditation from a secular danger to a mission-minded tool.

WELS schools in the PNW have never been a sure thing. Even the district itself has faced existential crises.⁴⁸ What a tremendous blessing that God has allowed WELS schools to endure in the PNW for as long as they have. Schools that exist to teach the gospel,⁴⁹ and schools that

⁴² Rodmyre, interview.

⁴³ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

⁴⁴ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

⁴⁵ Rodmyre, interview.

⁴⁶ WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey.

⁴⁷ Mark E. Braun, “What Our Fathers Taught Us about Lutheran Schools,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 22.

⁴⁸ Lueckel, “History,” 27.

⁴⁹ Braun, “What Our Fathers Taught Us (Part II),” 7.

possess “the chronic Lutheran habit of looking at everything through the lens of Law and Gospel.”⁵⁰

To be sure, there should be gratitude to the WELS church fathers for seeing value in the Christian day school since the Synod’s organizing convention in 1850.⁵¹ WELS educators have the honor and privilege of carrying on a legacy and joining Jesus on his redemptive mission. It is the author’s true joy to state that WELS educators in the PNW of the past and present have and continue to endure in that mission faithfully. “One soul is worth a lifetime.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Thomas Korcok, *Serpents in the Classroom: The Poisoning of Modern Education and How the Church Can Cure It*. (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2022), xiii.

⁵¹ Braun, “What Our Fathers Taught Us,” 18.

⁵² Rittierodt, interview.

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Appendix

WELS Schools in the PNW Called Worker Survey

*Thank you for your time completing this survey and thank you for your service to our Lord!
Please note that there are 4 required questions and 13 optional questions, so you may as
answer as many or as few as you would like.*

1. Name: *
2. What school ministries have you served at in the Pacific Northwest District? *
3. What years have you served in the Pacific Northwest District? (Ex: If you began teaching in the district in 2015, and are still teaching in the district, please say, "2015-Present") (If you have served at more than one ministry in the District, please separate the years by ministry.) *
4. Which other WELS Districts have you served in besides the Pacific Northwest District? * Check all that apply. None Arizona-California Dakota-Montana Michigan Minnesota Nebraska North Atlantic Northern Wisconsin South Atlantic South Central Southeastern Wisconsin Western Wisconsin
5. Historically or presently, what are some general challenges facing WELS schools and called workers involved in school ministries?
6. Historically or presently, how would you describe the general attitude of PNW WELS members towards WELS schools?
7. Historically or presently, how would you describe the general attitude of PNW called workers towards WELS schools?
8. Historically or presently, how would you describe the general attitude of non-WELS PNW residents towards WELS schools?
9. Have you or your school faced challenges that you believe are relatively unique to the Pacific Northwest? If so, please give examples.
10. If you answered yes to the above question, please explain how you and/or your school have responded to such challenges:
11. Have you or your school experienced blessings or opportunities that you believe are relatively unique to the Pacific Northwest? If so, please give examples.
12. If you answered yes to the above question, please explain how you and/or your school have responded to such blessings or opportunities:
13. What factors have contributed to the existence of WELS schools in the PNW?
14. Do you believe there are any characteristics that WELS schools in the PNW either possess or have developed that make them relatively unique from WELS schools in other districts? If so, please give examples.
15. Do you believe there are any characteristics that called workers in the PNW either possess or have developed that make them relatively unique from called workers in other districts? If so, please give examples.
16. What opportunities do you believe currently exist for WELS schools in the Pacific Northwest District?
17. Do you have any final thoughts for the author?

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