



**LUTHERAN
EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
MINNESOTA**

NEW FUND HELPS AREA LUTHERAN STUDENTS AFFORD PRIVATE SCHOOLS

By: Russell Tokheim on 05/01/06

A group of Lutheran laypersons with a passion for education is gaining momentum in its efforts to raise funds to help students attend Lutheran schools. Under the banner of Lutheran Education Foundation of Minnesota (LEFM), the group aims to raise \$100,000 this year and \$300,000 in 2007. Board members of the group have pledged to underwrite all administrative costs of the organization so that 100% of contributions will go directly to educating kids.

On the day this interview for Metro Lutheran was conducted, the group was awarding a scholarship grant at Concordia Academy-Bloomington. That school was formerly called Lutheran High School of Greater Minneapolis. Last year it combined administrative functions with Concordia Academy of Roseville. This scholarship grant was the third made by the fledgling organization. Previous scholarship grants went to East St. Paul Lutheran School and Central Lutheran School, both in St. Paul.

Board Chair Mel Soderholm got a passion for Lutheran school education when he served as a tutor at Trinity First Lutheran School in the Phillips neighborhood of south Minneapolis. He finds time for educational fund-raising in a busy life that includes running two Stereoland stores with his son.

When he first began his tutoring experience, Soderholm said 60% of the effort was maintaining classroom decorum with kids who swore at the tutors and threw things; the effort paid off and soon kids wanted to learn.

To keep administration efficient, the group, organized in 2003, shares a director with Lutheran Special Education Ministries. Dennis Senne, who had 35 years of experience with the Burnsville public schools, now works with both groups from a small office at Concordia University in St. Paul.

Though Soderholm and Senne are both members of St. Michael Lutheran Church in Bloomington, a LCMS congregation, and the organization has its offices at Concordia University, it plans to include WELS and ELCA schools and pre-schools in its scholarship grants.

Other members of the LEFM board include Merlin Bretzman; Robert Kuhlman, principal at Central Lutheran School; Lucy Einess and James Kelzer (treasurer).

Initial scholarship grants have been made to schools themselves, allowing the schools to make decisions about ultimate recipients of the aid. Soderholm sees initial efforts of the group to be toward inner city schools, gradually extending also to Lutheran high schools. He said, Schools can be a mission outreach for our churches. They're a way we reach parents who want a values-based education for their children.

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The funding organization's stated mission is to provide financial assistance to underprivileged students in grades pre-K to 12; to provide financial assistance to special education programs in Lutheran schools; and to recognize, support and re-ward outstanding Lutheran educators. Further down the line, LEFM hopes to make grants to schools with capital needs, such as replacing a boiler or a new roof. Secondary goals are to bring businesses and Lutheran business leaders together in a united front in support of Lutheran schools; to have its board continue to absorb administrative costs so that 100% of funds raised are used as intended by the donors; and to pursue a relationship with other Christian organizations that support Lutheran education.

To fund its ambitious goals, LEFM is getting its feet wet in fund-raising efforts with individuals. Future plans include grant applications to foundations and other organizations and holding special fund-raising events. Soderholm said one of the ultimate goals is to make Lutheran schools self-sufficient in fund-raising.

LEFM is patterned after Chicago Lutheran Education Foundation which provides assistance at 34 inner city Lutheran schools, a group that provided \$1.5 million in support in the most recent year. LEFM considers its goals complementary to those of Lutheran Special Education Ministries, which seeks to help schools offering special education. Lutheran schools receive no government funds for special education, which tends to be high cost.

More information about LEFM can be found at the Web site www.TeachOurKids.org.