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LCMS Schools:

Opportunities, Impacts, and Preparations

By Tracie Salgado

As parents increase their scrutiny over education, the United States is witnessing a subtle yet significant shift in school enrollment patterns. Post-pandemic dissatisfaction with public school—with added concerns over academic recovery, safety, and curriculum alignment—has propelled a surge in school choice options, including vouchers and education savings accounts (ESAs). As pillars of faith-based education, our LCMS schools stand ready to benefit from this upcoming potential influx of public school students transitioning to LCMS schools.

"And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them." (Mark 10:13–16 ESV).

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What are the numbers?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), public school enrollment has stagnated or declined slightly in recent years, while private school participation, particularly in Christian institutions, shows modest growth. Let's explore the possible influx of public-school students to LCMS schools. Along the way, let's quantify trends, examine the multifaceted impacts on these institutions, and outline proactive strategies for readiness.

As LCMS education embodies a holistic integration of faith and learning, this migration could renew congregations and curricula, but only if schools prepare strategically.

LCMS data, supported by broader national trends, indicates a possible transition. NCES reports that in the fall of 2021, approximately 49.4 million students were enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools. By fall 2023, this figure dipped by 0.2 percent from the previous year and 2.5 percent from pre-pandemic levels. It seems the line flattened in demographic shifts and alternative education options. In contrast, private school enrollment held steady at 4.7 million students, or 9 percent of the total, with Christian schools comprising the majority—about 70 percent, including LCMS schools.

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LCMS schools specifically enrolled around 190,000 students across approximately 1,300 early childhood centers, and 945 elementary schools in 2023–24. These are strong numbers despite larger private sector fluctuations. EdChoice's 2025 report reveals increasing momentum: private school enrollment grew by 1–2 percent annually from 2022–2024, outpacing public declines, with Christian options like LCMS gaining traction in states with expanded choice programs. However, public enrollment hovered at 87 percent in 2011, but fell to 85 percent by 2022, as families sought alternatives amid chronic issues like teacher shortages and learning loss (Pew Research, 2024). Projections suggest that if current trends persist, driven by universal voucher expansions in 10 states, LCMS schools could see about a 5–10 percent enrollment increase within five years, potentially adding 9,500–19,000 students nationwide.

Why the influx?

This potential influx is fueled by parental dissatisfaction and policy shifts. A 2024 EdChoice survey found that 60 percent of parents considered switching schools last year, with 28 percent acting on it, often citing public sector dissatisfaction like declining test scores (down 5–10 percent post-COVID per NCES) and ideological mismatches. Notably, 58 percent of parents now support public funds for private or religious schools, up from 50 percent in 2007, reflecting a cultural pivot toward faith-integrated options.

Voucher programs amplify this: Wisconsin's longstanding system and the nation's oldest, has funneled over $300 million annually to 400 private schools since 1990, with our LCMS schools like those in Milwaukee absorbing 20-30 percent of new entrants. At Pilgrim Lutheran School in Green Bay, one of LSEM's partner schools, they embody this trend. Their growth represents a steady incline for the past five years.

In 2024, expansions in states like Arizona and Florida, where ESAs cover 90 percent of families, doubled private religious enrollment in participating schools, with LCMS schools reporting sustained growth (*FutureEd*, 2025). For LCMS schools, this could mean families are seeking moral grounding and smaller classes.

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What effects will our LCMS schools see?

Such growth, while exciting, poses significant effects on LCMS schools. Diverse student bodies could enrich theological discourse, fostering interfaith dialogues aligned with LCMS emphases on grace and community. Enrollment surges have historically boosted Milwaukee's voucher LCMS schools by 15–25 percent.

However, this growth is not without its challenges. Quick growth risks overcrowding, straining teacher ratios, and diluting the intimate, confessional ethos. Resource demands like textbooks or technology could escalate 20–30 percent, while cultural integration of non-church families might test doctrinal fidelity.

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Staff burnout is another peril. NCES notes private schools' 10 percent higher turnover than publics', made worse by influx-driven caseloads and LCMS-specific shortages where the graduation rate of those called to teach in LCMS schools does not equal the number of teachers needed.

Will more students equate to more diverse learning needs?

A significant subset of transferring students will bring diagnosed or undiagnosed learning differences, with 15–20 percent of public-school children identified under IDEA (NCES, 2023). LCMS schools, not bound by IEPs, can embody Christ's call to inclusion through faith-aligned, evidence-based supports:

Embed a special education program with Lutheran Special Education Ministries (LSEM) or some other appropriate agency.

Leverage IDEA Equitable Services: Parents can request public district evaluations under Child Find. Eligible students receive proportionate services (e.g., 60 min/week Orton-Gillingham tutoring; speech-to-text software) delivered on-site, at no cost to the school or parents.

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Adopt Structured Literacy (UFLI/OG): Train staff in UFLI Foundations or Wilson Reading System—explicit, multisensory phonics proven for dyslexia.

Implement Universal Accommodations: Offer school-wide access to various accommodations based on student needs which benefits the entire class. (See "Accommodations in the Classroom" in December issue of Shaping the Future.)

How can LCMS schools prepare?

To take advantage of this possible opportunity, LCMS schools must prepare holistically.

First, bolster professional development: Synod-wide training with LSEM in best practice pedagogy, structured literacy, inclusive faith education, and other topics as individually needed to equip teachers for the diverse needs of incoming students.

Second, invest in infrastructure: modular classrooms and hybrid learning spaces that could accommodate 20–50 percent growth without compromising intimacy, as seen in voucher-adapted Wisconsin models.

Marketing that highlights LCMS distinctives can attract aligned families, targeting the 34 percent open to private options.

Financially, diversify revenue through endowments and partnerships with choice nonprofits, ensuring sustainability beyond vouchers.

Foster community: Build buy-in on learning differences with LCMS theologies, mitigating assimilation risks.

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A popular seminar at the LEA Convocation in St. Louis in October 2025.

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In conclusion, LCMS data shows a transformative influx to LCMS schools, driven by public dissatisfaction and choice expansions. This could increase enrollments by 5–10 percent, yielding missional gains but demanding vigilance against strains. By prioritizing educator empowerment, grace-centered support for learning differences with ministries like LSEM, and adaptive infrastructure, LCMS institutions can emerge not just ready, but radiant and ready to answer Christ's call to educate the whole child in an uncertain age.

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Resources:

https://lesastl.org/metro-area-lutheran-school-enrollment-increases-for-fourth-consecutive-year/

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cga/public-school-enrollment

https://witness.lcms.org/2024/the-challenges-facing-lutheran-schools/

https://luthed.org/early-childhood-and-school-statistical-report/

https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/education/elementary-schools

https://www.edchoice.org/2025-edchoice-share-exploring-where-americas-students-are-educated/

https://www.edchoice.org/what-you-need-to-know-from-the-massive-nces-school-choice-report/

https://www.future-ed.org/directional-signals-a-new-analysis-of-the-evolving-private-school-choice-landscape/?utm_sourcechatgpt.com

https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/06/us-public-private-and-charter-schools-in-5-charts/?utm_sourcechatgpt.com.

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Review, Reflect, Resolve

- **LCMS schools stand poised to see an increase of 5–10 percent in the next five years. What would that increase look like at your school?**
- **What resources might be most strained with a large increase in enrollment? What can you do now to mitigate that strain?**
- **How can you market directly to families already part of the LCMS family?**

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