

**“Choosing” to reach out:
St. Marcus reaches out with the Milwaukee Parental Choice program. (An
interview with called leaders at St. Marcus.)**

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One of the greatest blessings that the Lord has given to our church body is a strong system of schools. However, in the last few years, we have witnessed a troubling rate of decline in the enrollment of our elementary schools throughout the synod. We will be taking a look at one of our elementary schools in Milwaukee that is not experiencing the decline that many of its sister schools are. In fact, St. Marcus Lutheran School has more than doubled its enrollment in the last year.

St. Marcus is an old school located in the heart of Milwaukee. It has experienced its share of ups and downs due largely to its changing neighborhood. However, regardless of its apparent success, or lack thereof, the school has always been dedicated to the neighborhood and reaching out to souls that do not know Jesus.

Recently, St. Marcus entered into the Milwaukee Parental Choice program, a system in which the government gives families that are struggling financially the opportunity to enroll their children in private schools. This program has enabled St. Marcus to reach out even more to the families in its neighborhood.

We will take a closer look at St. Marcus Lutheran School, and how it has made use of the Milwaukee Parental Choice program as an outreach tool. This will be done in the form of three interviews. First, Pastor Mark Jeske will give us a brief history of St. Marcus Lutheran School, and the changes that have taken place there in the last fifty years. He will also provide the background to the congregation's controversial decision to get into the choice program. Next, Principal Kole Knueppel will discuss the choice program in a little more detail. He will comment on some of the concerns that people have expressed regarding the program, and how he has seen them play out at St. Marcus. Mr. Knueppel will also give some advice to other churches who may be thinking of using their school as more of an outreach tool in the future. Finally, Pastor James Skorzewski will tell us about his role at the school and give us some examples of how the Holy Spirit is hard at work through the gospel at St. Marcus Lutheran School.

The following is not a word for word transcript of each interview, but rather an accurate summary of each man's words. A summary of each question will appear in bold type followed by a summary of the answer.

The History of St. Marcus Lutheran School – Pastor Jeske

St. Marcus School is one of the ironies of the synod because it was founded before St. Marcus Church. Usually it is the other way around. Since the school gave birth to the church, our congregation has been closely associated with elementary parish education from the beginning of its existence.

The school began as a branch school of St. John's, Vliet St., which was growing astronomically in the 1870's. (Immigrants were just pouring into the country, and Milwaukee was one of the destinations of choice for a number of reasons. There was already a large German component in Milwaukee, and a lot of good farmland in the area. Many of the Germans that came into the country were farmers, so they tended to head for the North because it reminded them of home.) St. John's bought a house for their branch school on the far north end of town, where all of the development was happening. It was a house that was about ten-years old and located on the corner of Palmer and Garfield, which was a residential area that was growing very rapidly. Many of the workers in the area were employed by the breweries or in the construction trade. (A lot of the founding members of St. Marcus Church were in the building trade: carpenters, laborers, and plasterers.)

For three years, 1872-1875, that house was operated as a one-room school by a single teacher, J. B. Denninger. In 1875, thirteen families decided that it was clumsy having a two-site school, so they petitioned St. John's to sell the building to them so that they could found a congregation around it. St. John's consented and sold them the house for \$1,000 (a great deal even in those days) with the condition that the new church would join the WELS. This is another great irony of the synod because St. John's has since left the WELS even though St. Marcus tried to talk them out of leaving.

The school grew very fast. Although, at first they couldn't figure out if they needed a pastor or a teacher. They only had the money for one staff person, so they let the teacher go so that they could call a pastor, whom they then stuck with the job of teaching school all week. The first workers at St. Marcus were pretty much worked to death, and there was a fair amount of turnover in those first few years. The first pastor stayed only three years. The second pastor, Eugene Notz, actually taught at the seminary (which was located only a block away from St. Marcus at that time) in addition to serving St. Marcus as pastor and teacher. In 1880, St.

Marcus' dual relationship with the seminary ended when the seminary was moved to Eimerman's Park on 13th Street, and we got a new pastor for a decade.

The school grew by leaps and bounds in the 1880's. Those were peak years for German immigration, both Catholics and Lutherans, and St. Marcus benefited tremendously. In the 1880's, St. Marcus had 200 baptisms a year. There was terrible infant mortality in those years, but there was still an explosion of growth in the school. St. Marcus bought another house because the original building was becoming cramped (one floor was for the school and the other floor for worship). They moved the original house to the back of the lot in order to erect a wooden church in 1881. The house was moved again, in 1884, to make room for a parsonage. Then another frame structure was built so they had four framed structures jammed onto two lots. It was extremely congested and eventually viewed as being unworkable. The congregation took a huge leap of faith in 1894, and bought another lot and erected a brick school building for \$20,000.

Those were really peak years for the school and enrollment numbers at the height of the German immigrant inpouring. The statistics are very misleading, kids were coming and going all the time, but I've seen some photographs of those years, and one class alone had 75 kids in it. That put the enrollment in the mid-300's in the late 1890's. It began to taper off after that. Immigrating German parents wanted to preserve as much of the old country as they could. They didn't think of themselves as Americans with German accents. They thought of themselves as living in exile, so they wanted their kids to be taught in German. However, succeeding generations were no longer so pro-Europe, and they began to see the public schools as not such a bad thing. Then in 1914, Germany became the enemy at the start of WWI, and the school's attendance dropped to the low 100's.

However, they began to build back up again. I think it was because they loosened up a little bit and began to take in other kids. They charged tuition off and on throughout the 1910's and 1920's, but Pastor Ernst Dornfeld, who set the record for pastoral longevity (1911-1955), believed that the school should be used as a mission arm of the congregation. So, they took in a lot of kids from the neighborhood that they would educate for free. There are no statistics that I've found that tell how many of the school's students were not members, but my father, who served St. Marcus in the late 1950's, recalls that half of the kids in the school were not from member families. I am not surprised by this, because many of the 8th graders were never

confirmed. I look at the graduation and confirmation lists of the 1950's, and none of those people really stuck around. It was just kind of a transitional time.

The neighborhood, which probably hit its top in the 1890's, began a long period of decline. The lots were crowded and very narrow, and nobody wanted to live like that anymore. The original settlers began to move out and buy bigger lots and houses farther to the north and west. New immigrant groups moved in that were not as Lutheran. The congregation had around 2000 members throughout the 1920's and 1930's, hitting its high point in about 1925. Then the decline began. WWII accelerated changes even more because there was a huge demand for young men to be drafted into the army right at the time when Milwaukee factories were working 3rd shift and doing a lot of heavy manufacturing for the war effort. At that time, there were not only a lot of women who were encouraged to go to work in these factories, but also many African-Americans, who were working dead-end agricultural jobs in the South, headed north to Memphis, Chicago, and Milwaukee. The black Harlem was always on Walnut St., which is just south of St. Marcus. It was pretty well self-contained for a century, but in the 1940's, it began to bust out. Since property was so valuable, it grew northward, up along King Dr., from King Dr. to 13th Street, and from Walnut to North. Soon St. Marcus was in the middle of a very mixed neighborhood, and by 1950, its once mighty membership had been cut in half.

The first black graduate, Leon Todd, graduated from St. Marcus School in 1955 (He was recently defeated running for Milwaukee School Board again.). That began a trend in the congregation. In 1955, with a little bit of struggle, St. Marcus decided to integrate. It was a pretty courageous move at that time (the same year Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat), because there was still a vast amount of prejudice and racism all over the country, and Milwaukee was no exception. Pastor Paul Knickelbein was a big, strong man who had a really stubborn streak. He just decided that this was the way that it was going to be, and the people who disagreed with him left. I think his theory was, "Don't let the door whack you on your way out. If you don't want to play the new game, go someplace else."

The church membership declined steeply, possibly because of the fear of letting the Negroes in, but it was the right thing to do. In the short run, however, it ushered in some pretty dreadful years because the school leadership went into turmoil. They had a good faculty up until about 1960. Then, they all left the school at once, and Pastor Knickelbein was unable to get a decent faculty together. He'd get some good people, and they'd work for a little while, and then

they'd go. He also had some pretty weak people, a lot of temps, and the faculty in the 1960's was in constant turmoil. Enrollment in the school, which had been in the high 100's in the 1950's, was down to 120 in the 1960's. It continued to erode in the 1970's and 1980's. By 1981, the enrollment had shrunk down to 56 and was 100% African-American. All the white families with young kids had moved out. There were hardly any white families with kids that were members of the congregation by 1980.

The school got some stabilizing leadership by some very mission-minded people who may not have known how to change things too much, but they decided to make a go of it. They were committed to the idea that the congregation school be open to African-Americans. Fred Hagedorn in the late 1960's and early 1970's, and Dan Gartner, our leader in the 1970's, and 1980's were committed to integration and worked cheerfully in an all black school. Yet, there was still a key component of that vision that was missing, namely that the school would be for white families too. It was still like a mission school to African-Americans in the 1970's and 1980's, and during that stretch of time, there were no white kids in the school.

One thing I became convinced of when I arrived at St. Marcus in 1980, was that we would never be more than a mission school for the colored, a place where no middle-class people would enroll their kids, until we changed our goals for the school. The one thing I worked very hard at in the 1980's was to reintegrate the school and make it believable for white families to come in. We got some really strong teachers who began to lift up the behavioral standards, and as Milwaukee moved farther and farther away from the riots in 1967, some of the racial antagonism diminished. There is always racism, there still is today, but it is not as overt. Milwaukee has slowly been getting used to black and white partnerships. As we got farther away from that, it became more and more believable for white families to begin to want to worship on Palmer St. once again instead of running away from it. We had some really good people and worked really hard at our relationships, and so a small trickle of white people began to enroll at our school in the mid to late 1980's. My first child was born in 1987, and in 1991, I was ready to commit my own kids too. My pastor and principal predecessors did not believe in the school to the point of enrolling their kids in it. I did, and I think that it showed that I was serious that this was a good school for kids. There is still an overwhelming black majority in the school, but now there is also a substantial number of white kids, at least twenty to thirty of our 200 plus students.

The school slowly crept up from the 1960's. We had to claw and work like dogs to get it up over 100, and it was pretty tough sledding. We were also running out of space in the old school building. Even after converting an undesirable room in the basement, we only had six classrooms. By the mid 1990's our enrollment was in the 110 range, and we were starting to have full classrooms. I would say that the comfortable building capacity was in the 120's. We had no gym, one smallish office for the school, inadequate restrooms, no air-conditioning, and not a lot of storage. We had always yearned to have a gym (tired of 125 years of away games).

A real opportunity arose in 1996-97 in that the voucher program that had been flourishing in Milwaukee since 1994 in nonreligious schools was declared to be constitutional by the legislature for use in religious schools as well. You could receive vouchers at that time of around \$4,000 per kid if your family income fell below a certain level. Our principal and school board did not initially welcome the program at the time, but everyone else in the congregation wanted to do it. When the final vote was taken, it was 90-3 in favor of the program. We thought that that was pretty much a mandate. Our principal and school board members who opposed the idea didn't hang around very long. However, they did cheerfully participate that first year as we got the program launched. We began to say yes to a lot more kids, and right away our enrollment had a little surge to the 110's.

Another surge forward came when we got a new principal. We decided that we weren't going to go anywhere without a full-time administrator, and it really made the program take off when we decided to budget for a full-time administrating principal, Kole Knueppel. He is a true education maniac and is fully behind the choice program. Simultaneous to that was our decision to launch into a building project that would more than double the size of our school building. That meant that we would be able to open up even more. Once we demolished our old building, we were further blessed with the opportunity to rent a building from the YMCA that had ten classrooms. By using this building we were able to allow all the demand to come in that wanted to, and we opened the 2002-3 school year with 220 students. At times it is very chaotic and stressful, but so far it has worked out ok. We have an awful lot of new people on our faculty. Only two or our teachers have been with us for more than three years, but the new people are young and full of energy. They are resilient, tough, and idealistic. They are not entrenched in other ways of doing things, so their flexibility is much appreciated.

Our registered enrollment for next year (in the new building) is already at 230, and we are going to have to turn people down already. We are going to have to make a decision about our future. Are we going to be an elite school, or are we going to build again and become a school of 400? Maybe we will start a branch school. No one knows for sure what to do. We are just excited to get into the new building.

So far, I would say that the choice program has really worked for us. It was kind of lonely at first since we were the only WELS school to get into it that first year. But, the next year, the school board at St. Phillip's School kind of mutinied against their pastor and decided to jump into the program. A couple more schools would jump on board in each of the next years, and I think that there are now eight or nine WELS schools who are a part of the Milwaukee Parental Choice program.

Goals in getting into the school choice program – Pastor Jeske

The first goal is an obvious one and probably doesn't even need to be said, and that is telling people about Jesus. We are in the disciple-making business on Palmer St., and we will try anything that helps us get the message out wider and louder, better and bigger. We want to tell people about Jesus, and we also want to train and disciple people for Christ. You can do that with church services and adult Bible studies, but there is no substitute for a school where you get the kids for six, seven, or eight hours a day. You have access to their hearts and their heads. This is probably the thing that the WELS does best. We are not the best evangelists, missionaries, musicians, or preachers, but the one thing we do as well as anybody is elementary education. We have a good training system, and a tremendous source of idealistic and ambitious gospel-motivated men and women who love kids and love to give their lives to serve the Lord. We do education well, so to use it as an evangelism tool seems to be a great idea.

The WELS is not real great at penetrating cities with the gospel. In fact, most of the WELS churches in metropolitan areas are either declining or collapsing. Few are stable. We just don't know how to get into the cities. The one thing that is really working as a way of attracting attention and building relationships with non-Germanic American people is through schools, something everyone needs. Public schools in most major metro areas in America are either bad, lousy, or miserable. Milwaukee, though it is having some amazing success stories, is widely perceived as having vast numbers of kids who are not advancing. By the time you hit high

school it really hits the fan. If you are an African-American, you have only a 4% chance of graduating high school at your grade level. If you are a 9th grader in an MPS school, your chances of graduating in four years is only 40%, and that number is declining. Attendance rates at some of the inner city urban high schools is only about 50%. We think that our school meets a huge community need. We get a lot of respect and gain the opportunity to build many relationships.

It is our hope to use those relationships to either encourage people to be active in the churches they are at, or to become active in our church. It is not our goal to take active members away from other Christian churches, but to juice them up and get them more excited about the gospel. Of course they are trusting us to train their kids as Lutherans, so we are filling their heads with Lutheran theology. It may be that they go to work in their own churches, but take the training that we gave them and make sure that the true gospel message is going to be heard in those denominations as well. Many of the parents that come in are unchurched. We see that as fair game to invite them to Bible classes so that they know what we are teaching their kids. Possibly the Spirit will move them to worship with us and have a look at joining our congregation. Our goal is not to use the law to beat them into obedience (Bible class attendance etc.). Besides, the school choice program forbids us to do so. I am glad to be told that we can't do that, because we are going to use the gospel to invite people and earn their trust. We are going to make our program so compelling that people will see the value in it and want to come and join us. Our goal is that every unchurched family who enrolls their kids in our school will come to love St. Marcus Church as well. That is always an ongoing task and unfinished business. In order to meet that goal, we have called a second pastor for whom that is his primary job.

Explanation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice program - Kole Knueppel

It's a program in which parents who are below the poverty line qualify for participation. They have to live in Milwaukee and be below the poverty line. Also, when they approach a school, the school has to take them. There can be no screening or any kind of interview process in which some of the students are rejected because of behavior or because of grades. If a parent comes to the school and signs up, you have to accept them. I think that this is a good thing

because it prevents elitism, where an elitist school can pick and choose which students they want.

Parents are free to choose from any school in Milwaukee that is participating in the program. The school is in control of the number of students they want to take. They could take five students or 500 if they want. They just have to notify the state of how many students they want to take.

The checks are made out to the parents, and they come in and sign the checks every quarter. There are four disbursements from the state, and the checks total \$5,783 this year for each student enrolled in the program. The reason that the program is constitutional is that the parent is making a private choice to have his or her child attend the school. It's sort of like the GI bill. The check goes to the person, and they choose where they want to use the money. The fact that they choose to use it at a religious school is really a matter of their own choosing.

Some concerns: The opt-out clause - Kofe Knueppel

A lot of people had concerns about the opt-out clause, and to be honest, so did I before I came to St. Marcus, because it is something that potentially could cause problems. But having worked with families here at St. Marcus for the past two years, it is a clause or concept that, in theory, could cause problems, but in reality it is never an issue. Every time we enroll a parent, we take them on a tour through the school, and we talk about what the kids are going to learn. We talk to them about the fact that we are a Christian school, and we are going to teach that the Bible is God's Word, and that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. When we go through that with the parent, the notion that they would sign up for our school and then turn around and say that they don't want their child to participate in chapel is kind of strange. The fact that they sign their child up for an education in a Christian school indicates that they want that for their child. We even have a Muslim student this year. When we told the parents about what we were going to teach their son, they said that they don't believe the same things we do, but it's ok if we teach their son that.

So, I don't see it as an issue. They cannot opt out of Catechism class or any other classes that are part of our curriculum, but if they would decide to opt out of chapel, I still feel that it is more beneficial for the child to be at our school and hear God's Word throughout the rest of the day, than be in a public school and not hear it at all. I have never heard of it happening at any

choice schools, but even if it were to happen, I still think that it would be beneficial for that student to be in our midst, because the Word of God is in everything we do.

Government interference - Kole Knueppel

With some of the issues and concerns it is just a matter of us as a Christian body staying vigilant and not letting it happen. We have a lot of choice money coming into our school, and the day that the government starts telling us what we need to do and putting requirements on those dollars is the day we get out. We are not going to cave to their wishes, particularly if it has anything to do with religious participation. Right now, there are relatively low standards for participation: You have to fill out an attendance, and there are some other requirements that the government puts on us, but it is all very minimal. Again, I really think that it is a matter of Christians being vigilant that this doesn't occur. At the same time, to say that we will not participate because something like this might happen is not a wise thing to do. It is not good stewardship because it is basing something on what might happen, and not on what is occurring at the moment. As long as we stay vigilant and don't get too hooked on dollars, we should be fine.

Negative effect on the atmosphere of the school - Kole Knueppel

I think that the choice program has worked really well at St. Marcus because we have paid close attention the atmosphere of the school and to behavioral concerns. We have made it a priority to really pay very close attention to spiritual concerns. Overall, the atmosphere at our school is a very good one. That being said, I understand people with those concerns, because if we weren't vigilant, we could see some significant problems because we do have some new students who come in with some pretty big issues. We have also had some significant problems with some kids who have been at the school for a long time, probably just as many problems with those students as with the choice student. It's really a non-issue, because if you take care of business and have an agenda, ultimately it is the adults who determine what the atmosphere of the school is going to be. Whether it is a public school or a private school, the adults are the ones who should be setting the agenda. If they are not, it is the adults that have the problem.

Stewardship - Kole Knueppel

Of all of the concerns about choice, that is the one that has the most meaning for me, because I see it happening somewhat at St. Marcus. The church contributes very little toward the budget of the school. You can sense a little bit of the mentality at St. Marcus that the school will be fine, we don't have to worry about it. That concerns me, because our stewardship shouldn't change no matter what is going on. Whether it is the government's money, or someone else giving a big chunk of money to the church, our own approach to our finances should stay the same. I see it changing at St. Marcus pretty significantly, and I think that it is a legitimate concern. Again, similar to the government interference question, I think it is something that can be avoided if we are vigilant and approach it properly. But, I think that it is very easy to slip into the temptation of giving less and being less committed financially.

What happens if school choice dries up? - Kole Knueppel

I have often said to the congregation at St. Marcus that if choice goes away, we really have a moral obligation to keep the families that we are currently serving in the school. It will mean changing the programs and doing a lot of different things, but again, not participating in choice because of something that might happen is a bad idea. It's not a legitimate concern because it is based on an "if" scenario. At St. Marcus, we've had wonderful things happen with children and with families that would not be at our school if it were not for choice. If choice were to go away for some reason, I would be fully committed to keeping everybody there. The thing is, you've got them there and there is a personal attachment to the families and the kids, so there is going to be momentum from people in the congregation to keep them there and to find funds to make this stay afloat. The other cool thing about St. Marcus is that, since we have grown so much and have 220 students this year, we have become much more of a viable school in a known quantity in the Milwaukee community. Therefore, the option of getting funds from foundations is much more realistic.

Goals for St. Marcus - Kole Knueppel

We have to figure out a way to bridge the school and the church in a meaningful way. When we ask the kids to write essays about what they value most about St. Marcus, the vast

majority of the kids will, unprompted, write about the fact that they learn about God's Word and Jesus as their Savior. That is the Holy Spirit at work. The long-term goal is to see the Holy Spirit work in the hearts of their families as well. The second goal, since many of the student's families are so screwed up, is to set up some long-term educational plans for the kids. In other words, the thought of a Lutheran High School is essential. A high school would provide a situation in which these kids would have the positive influence of a Christian school in their lives during their teen years. That will lead to kids going off to college and either becoming pastors or teachers, or just successful leaders in their community. We want to get the gospel into the kid's homes and also work with the kids in a long-term way that helps them to become good Christian leaders.

The effect St. Marcus has on these new students - Kole Knueppel

The changes we have seen in kids are pretty amazing. We have students who did all sorts of evil things at their previous schools, everything from hitting their teacher to assaulting other students. We've got the full litany of juvenile crimes in the files of kids who are at our school now, and you wouldn't even know it of many of them because they have been so transformed. I really believe that it's the gospel working in their hearts. It's the gospel working through their teachers. So many of the kids respond to the love that the teachers show to them, and it really has had a tremendous impact. I could list student after student who has changed dramatically. It's kind of funny because many of the kids who came last year and were a problem are not even thought of as being problem students anymore. To see that is amazing.

The most exciting aspect of having St. Marcus in the school choice program - Kole Knueppel

I think that the most exciting thing is to see the kids' lives change and the impact it has on the parents. In the long-term, the hope is that the parents will recognize the power of the gospel and respond to that. But, right now, to see the kids' lives transformed and to talk to the parents who might get teary-eyed because of the children's success is exciting. There are other really triumphant moments, like when kids and adults are baptized. But, I really think it is the best when a parent loses it because they are overjoyed at seeing that their son has become a

decent young man all of a sudden. We see little miracles all the time, but it is just great to see a parent who didn't have much hope at all, or a kid who didn't have much hope, start to have hope and expectations for themselves. That is pretty awesome.

The community's view of St. Marcus - Kole Knueppel

Overall, the community views St. Marcus very positively. The school is just a magnet right now. Last year, we did quite a bit of recruiting, just walking the streets to get the kids. We made a lot of contacts, but had to work really hard to get to 220. This year we have done no recruiting, and we already have 240 with waiting lists for almost every class. We will probably end up with a waiting list of almost 100 if the numbers keep going the way they have been. That alone kind of indicates where people are at with the school, and how they feel about it.

I think that our challenge is to try to figure out how the church fits into that scenario. The church has grown hugely, but not from the neighborhood. We have to figure out how to approach that. Obviously, it is a great blessing that the church has grown, but trying to figure out how to integrate the church as it is now with this new flock of potential souls is tough. I don't know how the neighborhood views the church, because we are staying relatively stagnant right now as far as neighborhood growth goes. We have experienced some growth in that area, but not much. Meanwhile our church is enjoying a boom from other areas of the city, from the suburbs and so on.

I don't know quite what that means as far as how the neighborhood views the church, but I definitely feel strongly from our enrollment and from feedback from current students and their families that they view what is happening at the school very positively. We definitely have an in with all of these families as far as outreach is concerned, because of the fact that the school is such a positive thing in the parents' minds. There is definitely the opportunity for the gospel and the Holy Spirit to work in these people's hearts. We just have to really make sure that we get out and work at making that happen. We need to do more to follow up and bridge the church and the school.

What kind of advice would you give to another church that is thinking of using their school as more of an outreach tool to the neighborhood? - Kole Knueppel

I think that it is a beautiful way to do outreach. Again, if you've got a really positive school situation, it is really a natural conversion to then get involved with the church. I just think there is so much potential to do it. I occasionally get disappointed because others are hesitant about school choice, or they will say, "Your enrollment grew just because of choice." When I mentioned before that we recruit a lot, we really just went around and asked people to come to our school. It really wasn't a big magic formula. It was just an effort to reach out to people. I really see, in the short-term, that it's just having a phenomenal effect on people's lives because they are in a Christian school, and it's changing who they are. So it is a beautiful thing. I think, in the long-term, it will have a tremendous impact on the church as well.

So, my advice to somebody else would just be to go for it. Use your school as an outreach tool as often as you can. Just have open arms and welcome people. We have such a good product in our Lutheran schools, there is no reason why we shouldn't be reaching out in every community we are in and welcoming people to our schools. We have such a structure and such a firm grasp of the Bible and God's Word that our schools can really be beautiful places for people to come and hear the message and be transformed.

What is your role at St. Marcus Lutheran School? – Pastor Skorzewski

We believe that we have a tremendous number of families who are both struggling physically and spiritually. The thing that separates us from other schools is the spiritual emphasis in our school. So really, my role is to make a connection with the kids first, because I spend the most time with them, and then to transition the relationship that I have with the kids into a relationship with their families.

Pretty much my entire week is spent in the school. Currently I teach 7th grade Catechism three times a week. I am also in charge of chapel that we do once a week. Tentative plans for next year include my teaching three grades of Catechism. We have a three-year program that we

want to institute. I will also be handling chapel, which will probably be handled a little differently to reach more kids.

How have you seen the gospel working in the students at St. Marcus?

– Pastor Skorzewski

I think it's crazy because sometimes we forget about the power of the gospel because we work with it so much. We just kind of take it for granted or forget just how powerful it actually is. I have been on staff now for 8 months. In those 8 months, I have done 22 baptisms and I have 3 more scheduled before the end of the year.

There will always be negative publicity for getting involved in choice. I look at the it from the flip side and say, "You know this is a tremendous group of people who haven't had the opportunity to hear about Jesus. If they are choosing to get involved in our school there is a reason. It isn't solely academic, but it is also because we are teaching about Jesus." We have everything from Baptists to Muslims in our school and they all know what we teach. The kids are so excited about hearing about Jesus and what he did.

A lot of my chapel talks this year have focused on baptism simply because many of our kids have never seen baptism, or they have never seen it done with sprinkling. So we talk about the different kinds. It has just been unbelievable to watch them understand and see what baptism does for them. I tell the story that St. Marcus is the only place where not only do you get an applause after a baptism, 220 kids going crazy because their classmate has just received the Holy Spirit, but you also get a huge round of applause from the kids when you make the sign of the cross on the head and on the heart. They just go ballistic. It's awesome.

We did one baptism that just stands out in my mind. We baptized four kids from one family at the same time. One of those kids, Tyrese, has been a knucklehead his entire life, and he still slips back into that once in a while, but he knows what his Savior has done for him. Now, when he makes a mistake, he doesn't make excuses. He goes to the cross first and foremost.

You see a change in Tyrese's behavior too. For example, Tyrese and Mr. Knueppel came over to our house for dinner one night. My wife made stuffed shells, these over-sized shells with chicken and broccoli in them. Tyrese ate about six shells and ate the chicken that was in them, but he left a huge pile of broccoli on his plate. Mr. Knueppel told Tyrese that Mrs. Ski worked

really hard to make this dinner, and if he didn't eat it, he would be saying that he didn't appreciate what she had done. Now, eight months ago, Tyrese probably would have flipped Mr. Knueppel off and not eaten the broccoli, but instead, he looked at the broccoli, shook his head and ate it all. Some might say that that's not a spiritual change, but it is. He is taking what Christ has done for him and applying it in order to live a sanctified life. This kid now looks forward to coming to church. He has gone out on his own to set up rides so that he can come to church on Sundays and hear the gospel.

A lot of these kids might not have people who care about them. We work really hard to expose them to things they might not otherwise have a chance to be exposed to. One of those things is a deep caring faculty. It gets overused, "What would Jesus do?" but that is really what we look at. How would our Savior show love to these kids? It's not by enabling them, or allowing them to continue in their bad behavior. It's loving them enough to correct it, and we do that through the gospel.

You asked before what my role is. Really, that's my role here. The principal and the assistant principal bring the law aspect into it with discipline. I bring in the gospel. "Understand what Jesus has done, now how are we going to change this?"

Getting the gospel into the homes – Pastor Skorzewski

It's difficult now because of the extended school day and because of the way things are with discipline as well. A lot of my time when I am not teaching is taken up with holding out-of-control kids, or getting a hold of parents to come in and help to get control of these kids.

What we are planning right now is to start an alternate church service this fall. This service will target our school parents in particular. It probably will not be the most traditional Wisconsin Synod service, but we are going to take a look at the gospel message and take it out to the people. There are several reasons we are going to do it in the fall as opposed to right now. We are going to be on one campus (church and school), which makes the most sense. The church will be right there although we probably won't use it right away because it is so large it might be kind of an intimidating situation because of the low numbers initially. We will also have the opportunity, through registration, which comes in the fall, to really hype this service and give me the opportunity then to get into a lot of the homes.

It is really difficult for me right now to get into the homes just because right now anytime you leave school, you kind of come back with a mess. The other thing is, especially with the older kids, if they have problems and want to talk to someone, my door is always open. If I am not there, it's kind of a hard thing for them. We are especially going to use the breaks as times when we will focus on getting into the homes. Easter break I was trying to make as many visits as possible. Summer vacation will be another great opportunity to get into the students' homes.

Final Comments – Christian Winkel

Clearly, St. Marcus Lutheran School is enjoying tremendous growth and outreach opportunity because of their enrollment in the Milwaukee Parental Choice program. My goal in doing this project was not to convince others that they should look at getting their schools into the choice program (Although I would not be disappointed if it did have that effect, unintentional as it may be.). I simply wanted to show that those who carry out their ministries in our WELS elementary schools, like St. Marcus, that are involved in the choice program are interested in more than numbers. They are extremely concerned about the souls of the children and families that they are serving. These workers are very aware of the dangers and difficulties that come with the choice program, but they view it as an excellent opportunity to reach out to more souls with the gospel. That is their main motivation for being involved in school choice.

Isn't that our motivation for everything that we do in our schools and churches, reaching out with the gospel? School choice is a program that is not available to every WELS school, nor is it something that every one of our schools in Milwaukee should feel obligated to become involved in. However, the outreach attitude that seeks to spread the gospel in the most effective way that we are able is something that is available at every school in our synod. This attitude is a blessing that comes only from God the Holy Spirit. May he motivate us to work hard at using whatever means possible, in the best manner that we are able, to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

Works Cited

See video footage of the interviews.