



PANTHER PULSE



A 1st Lutheran School Update

A LETTER FROM MR. FISHBURN, PRINCIPAL

Dear Alumni and Friends,

This year we celebrate God's Faithfulness to this school for 170 academic years! Our school's history began with a humble commitment by a group of Lutheran Families on Christmas Day in 1852, according to historical records. I doubt any of those families imagined the generational impact and thousands of others that would benefit from their stepping out in faith to do what they believed was best for their families.

The greatest legacy we can leave is continuing the legacy of these Founders 170 years ago - a foundation of Christ for the coming generation. As we get ready to mark Christmas Day 171 years after that initial commitment, we celebrate that Christ is still our foundation. As alumni and special friends, you play an important part of our story not just in the past, but also as we lay the groundwork for the future. We value your prayers and support as we seek to boldly move forward our vision of offering a strong Christ-centered, family-focused, student-driven education that impacts our community and world. Your support helps us continue to build on the past 170 years in preparation for the next generation.

We hope that you are as excited and encouraged by the work that God is doing at 1st Lutheran as we are!

Blessings,
Samuel Fishburn, Principal



Middle School Sports

As Middle School continues to grow, we are able to expand what we are offering. Last year, we started our first majorette team for middle school girls. They practiced weekly and performed at pep rallies and other events at school. We also have a tennis team that plays with other private schools in the area. This has been a great collaboration with other private schools to work with them and get to know them better. This year, we began our first Cross Country team as well. The students have been so excited to see this new sport begin. They run at 6:00am in the mornings, which is a true dedication to their sport.

We cannot have these growing sports without the dedication of parent volunteers to make this happen. We are so thankful to these parents who see the value of these sports and invest their time to help these students learn new skills.

Arkansas Learns Act

This school year, 1st Lutheran School joined many other non-public schools in Arkansas to participate in the new EFA (Educational Freedom Accounts) established by the state of Arkansas under the LEARNS Act.

The qualifications this year are:

- First time Kindergartener
- Current or Former Foster Care students
- Children of Active-Duty Military Personnel
- Students diagnosed with a Learning Disability as defined under Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Students who in the previous year attended an "F" rated school or district
- Students experiencing homelessness

This is a new initiative this year and we are very excited to be a part of this program. We have already seen an increased interest from families who would have never considered private school before because of the cost alone. The growth in our lower grades and another year of record breaking enrollment (the most in 10+ years) has shown that 1st Lutheran will really benefit from this program as it rolls out over the next two years.

This year, the LEARNS Act covered almost 90% of tuition for the families that qualified.



STAY CONNECTED!!

If you have changes to make to your address or you know of someone who did not receive a newsletter, please email Kristin Basham at kbasham@1stlutheran.com. Help us reach out and connect with all alumni and friends!



Celebrating 170 Years

Christ has been and will always be the center of all we do at 1st Lutheran School. God has guided us in so many ways beginning in 1853 in Long Prairie; relocating to 15 North First Street in 1864; erecting a frame building facing 12th Street in 1874; dedicating a brick building in 1914 with an addition added in 1947 at 419 North 12th Street; building a new school with a large campus at 2407 Massard Road in 1975-76; and adding a preschool building in 1992.

Pastor Merrill shared his views of what makes us different from other schools. "We weave Christ and His teachings throughout our entire day, five days a week, through our morning staff devotions, our Christian Character Formation Program/morning meetings, our daily religion classes, and our weekly Chapel services. Not only do we offer these very intentional times of teaching about Christ, and attempting to transform our children into His image, as little disciples, but we also find ourselves with countless other opportunities throughout our weeks and days to integrate Christ and his teachings into conflict resolution between students or discipline; openly counsel students who are grieving or who are struggling with matters of faith; counsel parents who are struggling with these same things; and so much more."

In short, when a student leaves 1st Lutheran School, not only will they have been provided with a high-quality academic education in general, but they will have been equipped with a deep knowledge of Christ and who He is; a high level of preparedness to be able to graciously explain and defend their beliefs to a skeptical world; a much deeper sense of Christian character and morals; and, most importantly, an educational experience where they were constantly being reminded, day after day, of the great peace with God that they are able to feel through faith in Jesus Christ, and the great freedom which Christ has brought us through His death and resurrection. In the end, these are all components of the most important education that we could ever pass on to our children: a spiritual and moral education which will help prepare them for life eternal!

Norma Cholcher and Sue Wendte, two former teachers of 1st Lutheran School, also shared their memories and experiences. They said that daily instruction would include study of God's Word and Luther's Small Catechism. Students were taught to be servant-oriented with high academic standards and they learned God's Word so they could live God's teachings so all would feel, students and parents alike, that they were part of God's family. Servant events were student-originated and student-led. Former students will remember serving a yearly dinner for Habitat, laying sod at a children's center, cleaning tombstones at Oak Cemetery, and monthly letters to homebound members. Students learned to forgive and encourage one another and love each other with a Christian love as brothers and sisters in Christ, where Christ is the Center of all we do in this Lutheran School.

Oh, there have been changes over this long span of time. We have gone from chalk with a slate to write on, to pencils and a Big Chief Tablet, to Chromebook tablets, computers and internet connections. There have been many changes in the world's moral values over these years and teaching methods. But the one thing that has never changed is the love that Christ has for us and each other in the 1st Lutheran Family.

How has 1st Lutheran School flourished these 170 years? First and foremost, by the glory and grace of God who has richly blessed us. The dedicated and faithful members of First Lutheran Church who also gave and continue to give their time, talents, and offerings to sustain our school. God has truly blessed our school with a dedicated and loving staff, families who see the importance of a Christian education for their children, and supportive alumni and friends. May God continue to bless our school and our church. A special thank you to Pastor Merrill, Norma Cholcher, and Sue Wendte for assisting with this article.

1st Lutheran Vision

1st Lutheran School provides a Christ-centered, family-focused, student-driven education impacting our community and world.

153 TOTAL STUDENTS

- 104 Families
- 51 / 153 (33%) of our students are new to campus

101 K-8TH STUDENTS

- Largest August K-8 (& K-6) enrollment since 2012

52 ECE STUDENTS

- 52% come from families new to our school

Staff Updates

We are thrilled to announce that God has led us to several new staff members for our 2023-2024 school year. With our expansion of a full middle school complete and Mrs. Davis' retirement, we had many positions to fill and we are so excited that the Lord provided these amazing people to fill our many roles.



Staff Milestone



Mrs. Sonja Guillory
25 years of service to
1st Lutheran School
as Secretary

Thank you to everyone that helped us celebrate Mr. and Mrs. Davis' years of ministry to 1st Lutheran School and our church upon their retirement this past spring. Kathleen has been a pillar in the Fort Smith fine arts community as she put our program on the map many years ago giving us the amazing reputation we have for our arts program. JD's dedication to our school shows in the quiet way he made sure everything was taken care of on a daily basis to make our school run successfully. We are so thankful for both of them and wish them all the best in the future. Well done, good and Faithful servant!



Thoughts From a Former Teacher....

My name is Norma {Hartner} Cholcher. Lutheran parochial education was a big part of my life. I attended Lutheran schools from Second Grade until I graduated from Concordia Teacher's College in 1961. What did this parochial education do for me all those years? As students in a Lutheran School, we were daily in God's Word and Luther's Small Catechism. We had lots of memory work and were taught to learn our Churches' rich Hymnody. We always looked to God's teachings in the Bible for our strength and guidance for solving our everyday problems and circumstances. I was able to sing with touring choirs for 8 years and be immersed in worship and the music of the church, both choir and many instruments. God blessed me with wonderful Christian Friends that I still communicate with today. The bond that is formed between the students and teachers of a Lutheran School are priceless. I was blessed to teach at First Lutheran School for 32 years. My 1st or 2nd Grade students and I shared the love of Jesus and all those Bible Stories from Genesis to Pentecost every year. Oh, how wonderful it was to hear the children sing their faith in choir and in worship, both at school Chapel or in worship at First Lutheran Church. I pray the blessing of this school and its teachings about Jesus Christ our Savior will continue for many years to come.





Christmas Honors

For the past two years, our Middle School has participated in the "Christmas Honors" program through the Fort Smith National Cemetery. This program happens every year where family members and citizens come and place wreaths on the headstones of each veteran. Our middle school was asked to research veterans laid to rest there. Many of our students picked family members and others picked famous Fort Smith citizens to study. They learned so much throughout this study and even had their posters displayed at the cemetery during the laying of the wreaths ceremony. We are so thankful for this experience and for this program including our students these past few years.

A Letter From Pastor

Dear Alumni and Friends,

It's official: 1st Lutheran School is no longer Fort Smith's "best kept secret"! The word is out, and it only continues to spread with each new day: that we are a Christ-centered school, committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and education!

Our theme for this school year, which is based on Jesus' words in John 15:5, is as fitting and Christ-centered as ever: "Connected". "I am the vine; you are the branches", Jesus says. "Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing".

As thrilled as we are to be welcoming an influx of new students and families, as well as to have our highest enrollment in years, we are far more thrilled to have been entrusted with the privilege from our Lord to "connect them to the Vine"! As long as we maintain this



Christ-centered focus, as well as keep ourselves "connected to the Vine" as our source of strength, our ministry can never fail, and will only continue to thrive!

Even as we celebrate our 170th year at 1st Lutheran School, we remain in great hands – and it couldn't be more obvious to me that those hands are the hands of our God Himself! He has promised us that "not even a sparrow will fall to the ground, apart from [His] will" (Matt. 10:29), and the evidence of how true that is couldn't shine more brightly with each new day that we are blessed to be in this ministry! My heartfelt thanks to each of you for the role you have played in partnering with us in this mission throughout the years!

God's blessing to you all!
Rev. John Merrill, Pastor