

# Transformation: One Lutheran School's Story



Bethesda Evangelical Lutheran School, Chicago, Ill. Left: 8th grade teacher, Joseph Dembowski, leads chapel. Right: Kindergarten and first grade students make Memorial Day crosses to honor our country's fallen soldiers.

In the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago, Ill., a transformation is happening. A small Lutheran school is impacting the community in a big way. In the words of Principal Aaron Landgrave, Bethesda International Academy provides “transformational learning, anchored in Christ” for the children of the Rogers Park area. Each morning, principal Landgrave greets the children by name as they make their way through the school-room doors. Inside, they gather in classrooms, in the chapel and in the schoolyard to learn, grow and play. As Bethesda International Academy’s mission statement says, the students are being prepared to “...[transform] the world through a firm foundation of academics and faith.”

The school itself has undergone a significant change in the past few years. Formally known as Bethesda Lutheran School, the institution changed its name to reflect the increasing diversity of the student body. Rogers Park is the most diverse community in the city, and over 25 countries are represented in the school. With teachers and pupils who have ties to Dubai, Nigeria, India, Latin America and elsewhere, the students are being prepared to be true global citizens.

## Bringing Christ to the Community

“If you teach empathy,” explained Principal Landgrave, “you are teaching what you need to teach.”

This compassionate approach to education has made an obvious impression on the community since all but two families had no previous ties to the founding congregation (Bethesda Evangelical Lutheran Church) before attending the school. They are all from the neighborhood.

The school has been a great way to reach the surrounding community with the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Regular study of the scriptures, as well as chapel, are all part of student life at Bethesda International Academy.

One Muslim parent even said that her children love learning about another religion. Without Bethesda, many of the young

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children attending the school may not have had the same kind of opportunity to regularly hear God’s Word.

## Bridging the Gap

Now, a new transformation is happening at Bethesda International Academy. Financial difficulties led the school to seek a bridge loan from Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF). Like many Lutheran schools, Bethesda was having a hard time making ends meet. Although the school receives the generous assistance of the Chicagoland Education Fund, they still needed additional capital to ensure that they could be around to bring the light of Christ to the community for years to come.

“You guys were there [for us]. You are our lifeboat right now,” said Principal Landgrave, referring to the financial help LCEF was able to provide Bethesda International Academy during their time of need.

## A Bright Future

Last August, Bethesda had just over 50 registered students. Now, 84 children attend the school. A thriving devotional life marks the morning routine for the staff, and weekly chapel brings the whole school together to hear the Gospel. Four people from the Academy, including one teacher, were baptized this year alone!

“We are going to go forward; we are trusting,” said Principal Landgrave. “The school is growing, and God is working through Bethesda International Academy to transform the community around them.”

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## Dan Lepley

English District and SELC  
District Vice President  
317-402-9401  
Daniel.Lepley@lcef.org



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