Life at Four Corners
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Considering the parochial school an agency for ideal Christian training, a bulwark for church, home, and state, a necessity to preserve true confessionalism and practice, the Missouri Synod made its schools a matter of conscience with laity and clergy alike and thus succeeded in developing and preserving against great odds a system unique in American education.

The importance of the parochial school, especially the elementary school, to the synod and to individual congregations cannot be overstated. These schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served three major purposes. First, the school was used to inculcate Lutheran confessionalism and *reine Lehre* ("pure doctrine") in children. Church fathers emphasized that the parochial school was "essential to preservation and inculcation of sound doctrine." Children from age six to fourteen daily studied and memorized Lutheran doctrine and beliefs, and on Sunday in church, they heard a repetition of the doctrine that was taught Monday through Friday in their classroom. Lutheran theology, as interpreted by the Missouri Synod, stressed the inerrancy of the Bible and the importance of each believer's faith and acceptance of Scripture and the Lutheran confessions. The acquisition of Lutheran doctrine required the student to articulate, often in the form of rote memory, Lutheran articles of faith and biblical directives. Writing in *Der Lutheraner* in 1873, church leader C. F. W. Walther stated his philosophy on school to his lay and clerical readers.

May God preserve for our German Lutheran Church the gem of parochial schools! For upon it, humanly speaking, primarily depends the future of our church in America. . . . The continued utmost care of our parochial schools is and remains, next to the
public office of preaching, the chief means of our preservation and progress.³

Jay Dolan compares the nineteenth-century German Lutheran policy to the Catholic church's resolve to educate their children in the faith and language of their European heritage. Like the German Lutherans, Roman Catholics from a variety of ethnic backgrounds filled nineteenth- and twentieth-century parochial schools. Warned by American bishops as early as the 1860s, Catholic leaders feared the effects of Protestantism in the public school system, and many Catholic immigrants resented the public school's focus on Americanization. Dolan stresses the important role that parochial schools played in "handing on the faith" to future generations of Catholics.⁴

An important component of sound indoctrination involved the inculcation of moral values. Clergy and parents representing various religious faiths insisted that the schools participate in the moral education of children. Early schools in the United States, secular or religious, included the teaching of moral values as part of the academic curriculum. For immigrant children, a new "unsettled environment" offered more temptation, and "immigrant parents turned to schools to help instill basic rules, ways of life, moral concepts, and proper social patterns." No school, or a school providing the wrong moral message, could mean a life of sin, wrongdoing, and indigence.⁵

Besides providing religious indoctrination and moral education, the Lutheran parochial school functioned to maintain German culture and language. Most scholars agree that second-generation children "Americanize" more quickly when thrown into public school environments. Indeed this rapid assimilation process often caused a generation gap between the children and their first-generation parents or grandparents who attempted to maintain old-country ways in the home, which sometimes resulted in conflicts, resentments, and alienation.⁶

Most second-generation Missouri Synod children avoided the public school melting pot, with the parochial school bridging the gap between old and new.⁷ Before World War I, Missouri Synod elementary schools taught religion and some other subjects exclusively in the German language. German religious holidays, music, and traditions coexisted with American cultural traditions such as spelling bees, school picnics, and box suppers; the schools were essentially bilingual and bicultural.⁸ Thus the parochial school, particularly rural schools, did not compete
with old-country ways, an important factor since most children lived and worked only with adults and peers who shared similar backgrounds and beliefs. Robert Toepper discusses the importance of the German language to the Missouri Synod:

Intimate contact with the German language in grade school made possible the continuation of German-language worship services much longer than ordinarily would have been possible. Thus, long-established immigrants as well as their progeny, together with newly-arrived Germans, had the means of communication necessary to facilitate good rapport.\(^9\)

The Trinity Lutheran school at Block in many ways typified most nineteenth-century rural schools in the Missouri Synod. When the congregation at Block called its first pastor in 1868, he also assumed the duties of teacher for the children; few congregations could initially afford a pastor and a teacher. From Monday through Friday, the church building functioned as the schoolhouse, but in 1884 the old church building became the schoolhouse when a new church was built beside it. Pastors at Block served as teachers until H. Fischer was called to teach in 1890. The congregation built Fischer a three-room house two years later, which completed an array of buildings that included a parsonage, church, cemetery, schoolhouse, and teachers' residence only one-half mile south of Block Corners. The church grounds and the commercial center of the village stood in close proximity, symbolic of the connections between the German Lutherans and the community's institutions. Community and church activities often took place in the schoolhouse.\(^{10}\)

In rural America, the school served as a hub for a variety of community activities. Although social activities were often held in the school building, the parochial school may have played an even more powerful role in an insulated and religiously conservative community such as Block. Children and adults viewed the pastor and the teacher as the main religious role models of the congregation. As caretakers and leaders of the church and school, the pastor's or teacher's presence reminded the community that the purpose of the buildings was religious in nature; school had a religious as well as an educational purpose and was to be taken seriously at all times. Church, school, and home united to send a powerful educational message concerning religion,
learning, and behavior. Even in a social setting, children and adults were immersed in community values, rules, and culture.

Steady immigration and a high birth rate resulted in the Block school’s continued growth throughout the nineteenth century. By 1900 the school served seventy-two children in eight grades, and the number of pupils increased as the church steadily grew in the early twentieth century; in 1916 eighty-five students filled the one-room schoolhouse and church annex. But with the addition of the daughter congregation in Paola and because of lower birth rates, the school population decreased during the 1920s; by 1930 sixty-three pupils were attending, and by 1945 only forty-eight students were listed on the roster.11

Parents received extensive pressure to send their children to the Lutheran school. The minutes from early voters’ meetings reveal pleas and warnings by early pastors urging reluctant or uninterested parents to take better care of their children’s spiritual and educational welfare by sending them to the parochial school. In 1871 Pastor Zschoche exhorted the voters, “It is not a small sin against their children when [the
father] lets them grow up without instruction in the word of God.’’12 In 1889 the voters’ assembly was told that their ‘‘children would thank parents at their graveside for school.’’13

Just as New England Puritan clergy had done, Missouri Synod pastors compelled fathers to take the major responsibility for their children’s education.14 Fathers not only paid tuition and administered the school, they, along with male teachers, carried the major responsibility for their children’s attending the parochial school. Protokoll contains extensive lectures on the importance of fathers’ responsibility for their children’s education. As heads of the patriarchal family, the men of Block functioned as leaders and authorities on all religious or educational issues. The pastor educated the males so that fathers could educate the children.15 For mothers, St. Paul defined the prescribed role, ‘‘And if they learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home.’’16 Clearly, the church regarded a mother’s contributions as minimal to children’s religious education. She was, of course, to be a role model but always subservient to her husband.

Some men resented the additional fiscal burden of financing a school, but the pastor constantly justified the necessity of providing for the parochial school. Even as late as 1911 Protokoll recorded yet another exchange between the pastor and a layman. The parishioner asked, ‘‘Why do we not send our children into the free schools which are nearly empty and which also have to be [paid for] by us?’’ The pastor answered immediately

that we cannot and are not allowed to do so. All of our children belong to the school of the congregation because we have put them through baptism into the arms of the Lord Jesus because they belong to him. In the free schools our children [have] too many temptations and are brought into danger to be misled especially at the age of five and six years.17

Some families who sent children to school inconsistently or who chose not to at all may have been responding to the difficulty of transporting their children across rivers or to the danger of sending small children alone to walk the required distance. Another factor may have affected first-generation parents in their reluctance to send children to school, however. Census records show that many immigrants in Block were illiterate or minimally literate, having received little formal
schooling in Germany. These individuals may have seen little value in schooling when children needed to be prepared to perform farm and domestic labor, just as the generations of family members before them had. For some immigrant families, the time away from work and the hazards of traveling to school may have outweighed the perceived benefits.

Although most parents in Block wanted to send their children to the parochial school, some families were forced to make special arrangements if traveling to the school forced children to walk many miles or when swollen creeks impeded travel altogether. An oldest child might have been sent to a public school for a year or two until a younger brother or sister could make the journey to the parochial school also. Elsie Prothe Dageforde told of attending a nearby public school for her first two years until she and her younger brother could make the long journey (four miles) to the school at Block together. "We were too young to be driving a horse. And of course, dad couldn't take us every day. And it was so far to walk. We had almost four miles." It was not unusual for families to make special arrangements for the children with relatives who lived close to the school. Irene Minden Prothe stayed with her aunt and uncle during the week to attend school, and her mother brought the family "ham and potatoes" and other food to compensate for keeping Irene. When Irene was older she drove a horse and buggy to take herself and her four younger siblings to the school at Block.

The most perilous school travel befell the children who lived west of the Marais des Cygnes River, which could be extremely dangerous; crossing the swollen stream to attend school resulted in many close calls. Minnie Cahman Debrick, who traveled to school in a two-wheeled, horse-driven cart, recalled an experience her husband, Ed, had as a boy living "across the river."

Sometimes it rained a lot and it would just pour down... then they would have to pull the boat up and get the water out of the boat before they could go across. ... I know he said that his sister... [would] get so scared and she would stand up, and that was the worst thing you could do in a boat. They'd have to get her kind of quieted down, and I guess her dinner bucket came open, it was full of water, and sometimes water was almost lapping in the boat."
Even with travel difficulties and long walks and rides, the children came to the school in Block in large numbers from September through June. The one-room and later two-room schoolhouse resembled rural public schools, with hats, coats, and dinner buckets lining the back walls. The heating stove was centrally located, with maps, globes, reference books, and chalkboards along the walls. The desks surrounded the stove, and in the winter the children closest to it smothered and the ones farthest away froze. The teacher's desk, elevated on a raised platform, filled the front of the room. Each room featured a small organ that was used by the teacher and students daily.22

The curriculum of the school clearly separated it from the district rural schools in the county. Philosophically, the Missouri Synod schools attempted to teach children "to think consistently in harmony with their theology." Moreover, Lutheran teachers and educators were asked "to critically evaluate their educational theories and practices in light of this philosophy."23

To ensure the "theocentricism of all things" the synod in 1870 proposed a policy to publish its own schoolbooks. Concordia Publishing House printed a steady flow of prescriptive materials, which told children and adults how to think and behave and described the synod's opinions on religious and secular topics. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century clergy used the publications to warn members against poten-
tial secular threats such as birth control, divorce, women’s suffrage, labor unions, secret societies, and dancing. Children’s textbooks emphasized Lutheran values and beliefs. Synod leaders knew that they had a powerful tool to educate young and old, warning them to shun unorthodox and American secular beliefs.  

The school at Block, however, like many other parochial schools strapped for money, used some public schoolbooks for reading, spelling, grammar, arithmetic, geography, and history. This practice increased dramatically after World War I until secular books were used for almost every subject except religion. Oftentimes the school would buy these secular books secondhand from a public school that had purchased new ones.

The daily curriculum focused on religious instruction in the mornings and on other subjects during the rest of the day. Although no teachers’ reports or lesson plans survived at the school in Block, the synod’s guidelines for curriculum provide examples of weekly routines. Since all synod teachers received the same training, Block’s weekly routine was probably similar to the synod’s recommendations. In 1890 and 1928 the synod proposed a weekly time schedule suggesting the number of minutes per week that should be spent on each subject.

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A look at the recommendations for the pre- and postwar years provides some interesting contrasts. Although the 1928 recommendation
stated that the teaching of German was optional, the Block school did not discontinue the German language until 1937. As the German language was being phased out, civics, health, and general science were gradually being added to the curriculum. Time for English instruction doubled in 1928, and time for geography also increased. Although religion was still emphasized, it lost fifteen minutes, probably in order to accommodate the additional subjects. Interestingly, history received less emphasis after the war, but the reduction may have been related to the introduction of an American civics class. Only arithmetic and singing remained unchanged. Possibly these two subjects were considered so “value neutral” that American jingoism and adverse legislation had little effect. The importance of music remained, the synod would not give up singing time to accommodate other curriculum changes.

As in most public schools, the “hidden curriculum” abounded in gender differentiations and division of duties. Following the pattern of their parents in church, boys and girls sat on opposite sides of the room; at recess they participated in single-sex games. The teacher assigned boys to bring in wood and coal and to keep the stove ablaze; he expected girls to clean blackboards and floors. Sometimes this task meant coming to school on a Saturday for a fall or spring-cleaning day, just as their mothers made the pilgrimage to clean the church.

Recess included all kinds of ball games and particularly baseball for the boys. Although “the boys always pushed us off the field,” the girls also played ball but had their own version, called “tomball.” Other girls played “jackstones” and “house,” using string and yarn to wrap around twigs strategically placed in the dirt to separate imaginary rooms. Popular games played by both sexes included fox and geese, hide and seek, ring-around-the-rosy, and drop the handkerchief.

Gender definitions showed up subtly but consistently. Minnie Cahnman Debrick described a special marching drill the children performed as they practiced for the annual school picnic:

We’d practice and we’d practice, and the boys carried the flag and we carried a broom over our shoulder and we’d walk. . . . I don’t know why, I guess because the boys had the flags and the girls had to have something. So since girls done the housework . . . if you can figure out that puzzle, you can do more than I can.

Discipline seemed to be another area in which gender definitions
affected the behavior of both teacher and students. Interviewees consistently told me that boys were disciplined more severely than girls. Disciplinary action was exercised not just to control a child’s inappropriate behavior but as a punishment for not knowing the lesson. Although guilt was used to control children, the teacher also used shame as a powerful method of punishment. Corporal punishment was common, and usually the offender would have to go outside, find a stick, and bring it back to the teacher to use in front of the other children. If a child was disciplined at school, then he or she could often look forward to discipline at home as well; parents rarely challenged the authority of the pastor or the teacher in disciplinary practices. Marie Dageforde Monthey said that

fathers didn’t argue if the teacher punished somebody, they didn’t go and make the teacher apologize for punishing that kid. They punished that kid themselves when he got home, because somebody told on him that he got a punishment at school and he deserves one at home. So you better not squawk on him.

Some children developed ways to avoid or at least to lessen the corporal punishment. Monthey described a technique the boys used to avoid the teacher’s or the pastor’s wrath:

South of the church there’s a big hill where it goes down to the valley. [The boy] was sent to get the teacher a switch so he could paddle him. So he got a switch, but every so often [the boy] would cut a little notch in it so that when the teacher go to paddle him, the stick broke in pieces. Oh, I tell you. Those boys used to play tricks on the preacher and the teacher.

Even with the threat of severe punishment, the children of Block, like children everywhere, pushed the limits and took risks to have fun at the expense of an adult. While waiting for the pastor to arrive and begin catechism class, Elmer Prothe and a friend climbed up to the elevated church pulpit and began mimicking the pastor, much to the delight of their giggling peers. “One morning Ed Pope and I sneaked up to the pulpit and preached like [the pastor] did. And while we were a preaching and a preaching all at once [the pastor] walked in. We dropped down [behind the pulpit] and crawled under the table to our seats. We
didn’t get caught. For Elmer and Ed the stakes were high if they had been caught in such misbehavior. More often than not, the teacher or pastor did catch the prankster, and a young man would receive severe punishment. To receive his whipping the boy was required to bend over a bench and place his head underneath it.

Girls also received physical punishment, and although it appears that fewer girls were punished, the degree of punishment was equally harsh. One angry teacher threw erasers at whispering girls, and others resorted to whippings although the girls were struck on the back instead of on the buttocks. One irate pastor struck a girl so hard with his paddle that “the buttons on the back of her dress flew off.” Marie Cahman Debrick told a story about her sister’s punishment and their father’s intervention:
[The teacher] whipped black and blue streaks on her. And she never told anything, but when she took her bath, my mother noticed it, and so my Dad went and talked to him about it. First [the teacher] was kind of sloughing it off a little bit like it was nothing. . . . I guess Dad told him if he would ever do that again, he would hear from him.\textsuperscript{36}

Because of current attitudes toward corporal punishment, it is difficult to put these stories into historical context. Research on nineteenth-century schools shows that male teachers generally used corporal punishment more frequently than female teachers, and children in Block certainly received their share of it.\textsuperscript{37} Most of the teachers at Block were male, and the pastor used similar disciplinary methods with older children in confirmation class. The pastor and teacher clearly functioned in authoritarian and sometimes abusive ways. Their behavior, however, was similar to the treatment that some children experienced in the home setting and was commensurate with definitions of male authority and of the biblical directive not to “spare the rod.” In discussing their own experiences, interviewees saw nothing wrong with corporal punishment but felt at times that it was far too harsh or excessive.

Much was expected of a teacher in Block and in any other synod school. Besides teaching all ages of children, a teacher functioned as an accomplished musician capable of playing the organ for school and church, as choir director for all choirs, as a role model for adults and children, and in Block’s case, as an educated church official serving as secretary for the voters’ assembly.

From its inception the synod considered the teacher’s position important to the growth and development of each congregation. Until 1857 synod teachers received the same training as pastoral candidates,\textsuperscript{38} which was significant since many early pastors taught schools until the congregation could afford to call a teacher or until a teacher became available for service. In Germany, teaching achieved a high degree of respectability, and church fathers encouraged young men to enter the profession in America. Germany had a long tradition of males in the teaching profession, and church fathers continued this tradition in their adopted country. Unlike their male peers in nineteenth-century public schools, Lutheran teachers chose this profession as a permanent career, not as a transitional one.\textsuperscript{39} To enhance the teacher’s
position, the synod's constitution awarded him status as an advisory ministerial member of the synod. After graduation, like the pastoral graduates, a teacher received a "formal call, a Diploma of Vocation," consecrating him to his office for life. He was to be installed by the parish pastor in a formal ceremony before his new congregation.40

Until the 1920s the teachers' colleges of the synod made no attempt to parallel the methods of training in secular institutions. The early curriculum focused on religion, reading, and math skills, with an emphasis on music. As in the parochial schools in each parish, teacher training used both German and English.41 Around 1920, anti-German legislation and public pressure forced the synod to comply with state boards of education in accrediting its teacher-training institutions.42 The synod also installed district superintendents, similar to those in the public schools, to oversee and to help standardize the widening array of urban and rural parochial schools supported by local congregations.

Supported and directed by the Concordia Seminary faculty in St. Louis, Missouri Synod teachers attempted to dignify their calling by holding yearly teachers' conferences in each synod district and by publishing a professional journal, Das Evangelische-Lutheran Schulblatt. Beginning in 1865, the Lutheran School Journal, as it came to be called after 1921, published methods, essays, lesson plans, catechizations, and courses for teachers.43 Controlled and edited by the seminary faculty, the journal demonstrated once again the homogeneity of thought and behavior prevalent in the synod's training of both its pastors and its teachers. District and national teachers' conferences provided a forum for additional input on curriculum and methods.44

Until 1890 (and even thereafter if no teacher was available), the pastor at Block also functioned as the teacher. The congregation tried as early as 1885 to call a teacher, but a teacher shortage prevented them from receiving a graduating student. In 1889, at the prospect of losing their pastor, who was called to a smaller congregation with fewer teaching duties, the congregation tried assiduously to obtain a teaching candidate. Although their pastor did accept another call, the congregation received a teacher in 1890; H. Fischer came to Block as its first installed teacher.45

With a new pastor and a new teacher in 1890, the church and school at Block entered an extensive period of growth that lasted until 1921, when the daughter church in Paola was organized. Meanwhile, as the
numbers of students increased, so did the demands on the teacher. During this thirty-one-year period four different male teachers worked at the school, and nine different assistant teachers or primary-grade instructors taught as many as eighty-five children in eight grades.46

Besides teaching, serving as secretary to the voters’ assembly, organizing a young people’s club, and directing the choir, some of the teachers found time to give private organ lessons to young schoolgirls. Like the Catholic sisters who taught in parish schools, Lutheran teachers gave music lessons to supplement small yearly incomes.47 During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many school girls took organ lessons from the teacher.48 The community actively used and appreciated the musical background of its teachers. When Teacher Fischer left Block to accept a call from another school, the Paola paper called him “one of the best teachers in this county [and] the finest musician this vicinity ever had.”49

Because of these extensive duties and the growing number of students, in 1906 the voters’ assembly made a significant decision—to hire a female teaching assistant to teach the primary grades. By the turn of the century women teachers were the norm in public schools, but the synod had consistently warned against such a practice. In 1872, J. C. W. Lindemann wrote a highly controversial article in Das Evangelische-Lutheran Schulblatt, claiming, “Never do we want to or can we employ female teachers in such numbers as they [Catholics] do; we can never entrust our more mature male youth to ‘schoolmistresses’; but we might very well use them for the lower classes.”50 Besides the concern about handling large boys, the synod found itself in a theological dilemma. St. Paul’s edict on women being silent in the church and the sanctified calling of teachers made the use of women teachers impossible to justify. Only males could hold a sanctified position as a church official, and women were forbidden to teach and were required to remain silent and subservient to males.51

Because of economic constraints and changing attitudes, Lindemann’s ideas met with widespread resistance throughout the synod’s congregations, and in 1906 economic considerations forced Block, along with many other synod congregations, to hire a woman teaching assistant. This decision was “discussed thoroughly,” and eventually the pastor’s unmarried daughter, Anna Senne, was hired to teach “the two lower grades for one year with a salary of $100.”52 From 1906 until 1945, the school at Block had nineteen teaching assistants besides the
teacher who had been called. Eight of these assistants were women, and each taught in the primary grades, working under the male teacher who also served as principal of the school. 53

Block hired women teachers when men could not be called or when finances prevented adding an additional “called” teacher. Meanwhile, the national synod continued to wrestle with the dilemma of female teachers. Although the doors to one teaching institution officially opened to women in 1919, they were allowed to enroll only in small fixed ratios compared to male enrollment. 54 Writing in the *Lutheran School Journal* in 1925, John Eiselmeier viewed women teachers as a danger to “manly qualities in boys” and to the development of “feminine qualities in girls.” 55 He did not elaborate on how male teachers were to develop “feminine qualities” in young girls; it was simply assumed that they would do so. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the synod’s churches continued to hire women as teachers even though the synod refused to train them, except in small numbers, in their own institutions. 56

Although community values are difficult to assess, the parishioners at Block seemed to have far less difficulty in adjusting to women teach-
ers than did the male clergy, locally and nationally. Hiring the pastor's daughter served as a safe way to begin this experiment. According to interviewees' comments, the women teachers were well liked and appreciated; interviewees described "warmer" and "kinder" interactions with them. Students who had had women teachers in the public setting or in the early grades of the school at Block remembered feeling less fear and anxiety, emotions that often accompanied interactions with male teachers. Irene Minden Prothe proudly displays a treasured gift given her by a woman teacher, and many other female interviewees spoke fondly of some of their women teachers. For young girls who had few female role models other than mothers and relatives, women teachers served an important function in their lives, providing the first or one of the few interactions they had with a woman who was not confined to domestic chores and family. In a world of stern male authority figures, women teachers provided a welcome friend and role model.

Although the parochial schoolteacher functioned as the main role model for children, the pastor always made his presence felt, particu-

Classmates at the end of formal schooling, eighth grade and confirmation class, 1925.
larly with the two oldest classes. There was little doubt that authority in church and school was male. According to Alan Graebner, the elementary teachers determined much of the child's attitude toward religious authority: "Authoritarian legalism received a powerful and early inculcation when not only were 90% of the teachers male but when so many Pastors had such close contact with the children in their parishes."57

Even if pastors did not teach the elementary school, their influence was a constant; each day the two oldest classes would walk to the church and participate in catechismal instruction, which consisted of recitation of Lutheran articles of faith and biblical passages. Luther's Small Catechism served as the most important instructional book, and children memorized it in its entirety. The pastor asked the rhetorical questions, and the students responded with the prescribed answers.

The Missouri Synod described this educational instruction and the resulting confirmation as a way to keep youth involved in church activities and safe from outside secular influence.58 Slow, consistent instruction was deemed the superior method of inculcating doctrine in youth, and the synod made no attempt to hide its disgust with and suspicion of Protestant denominations that increased their membership through emotional appeals and tent revivals. "Emotional religion" and the "female illumination of emotions" in revival meetings horrified church fathers and were antithetical to Lutheran doctrine and practices.59

Confirmation was never automatic, and only the pastor determined if the child was ready to be confirmed after the two-year instruction course. Although it was unusual, some children were held back. The pastor's word was law, and he, like the teacher, did not hesitate to use verbal or physical punishment to make a point. Marie Dageforde Monthey told of one boy whom the pastor refused to confirm after his two years of instruction and described how the pastor publicly chastized the young man in front of his peers. "'You've been going coon hunting too much or you've been hunting skunks. I think you ought to study your catechism better. You better lay your songbook and your suit back. You can use that next year.' And that was all he told him. And he already had his confirmation outfit ready."60

To prepare the children for confirmation and to ensure that they studied their lessons, the congregation at Block, like most other synod churches, practiced Christenlehre ("religious instruction"). Typically
remembered with anxiety or terror, *Christenlehre* functioned as a type of Sunday school drill that was performed after the sermon each Sunday morning. The two classes receiving instruction were lined up in the front of the church and required to answer doctrinal questions in the presence of the congregation; an incorrect answer caused acute embarrassment and was not soon forgotten by the humiliated child or parent. Minnie Cahman Debrick described her feelings about *Christenlehre*: “And so many times I’d dream about that, and I’d dream that I didn’t get my lesson. I’d just have an awful time. And how embarrassing if you didn’t know your lessons. And I know I didn’t miss one question when I was confirmed, but brother did I work hard to get that.”

After two years of instruction class and *Christenlehre*, the fourteen-year-olds were confirmed on Palm Sunday in the presence of the congregation; they received their first communion on Good Friday. The confirmation ceremony signaled an end to childhood and formal schooling and functioned as a rite of passage into adulthood, its responsibilities, and full communicant membership in the congregation.

After Palm Sunday confirmation, most children never returned to school since the confirmation class was permanently dismissed. If children wanted to complete their eighth-grade year and receive a diploma, they finished at a nearby public school. The purpose of the parochial school was to provide religious education and to prepare the child for confirmation in the church, not to bestow a diploma. Robert Slayton describes this same tradition in Chicago’s Polish Catholic neighborhoods. Like the Lutherans of Block, Polish Catholic boys and girls attended school in equal numbers, and formal school ended with confirmation when they were between twelve and fourteen years old with or without a grammar school diploma. After confirmation, children in rural Block and urban Chicago were expected to begin their labors in the work world of their parents.

Since very few boys and girls from Block went to high school until the late 1930s, confirmation marked their entrance into more adult-related activities and concerns at the tender age of fourteen. For girls, this meant taking on more domestic tasks at home or going out to work as a hired girl, either in a relative’s or a nonrelative’s home. For boys, confirmation meant doing more farm work at home or working as a laborer for a relative or a friend. Illustrating the importance of confirmation as a rite of passage, *Protokoll* contains examples of parents’ special requests to have a child confirmed early because of economic or
family concerns. After the unexpected and early death of her husband, Doris Wilkens Clausen asked the voters' assembly if her oldest son Herman could be confirmed after one year of instruction class, thus freeing him to take on his father's workload on the farm. The request was granted when the pastor agreed that Herman "had the necessary knowledge," and Herman was confirmed, not expecting to complete his seventh-grade year.65
Elsie Gerken on confirmation day, 1927. It was common practice for students to have a special picture taken in their new dress or suit.

Trinity Lutheran Church took great pride and interest in its school, and Protokoll contains many references to school activities and purchases. The Ladies Aid provided materials and needed supplies to the teacher and students. Parents knew what to expect from the school and accepted the authority of the pastor and the teacher in most decisions, just as they accepted the sometimes harsh authority of the church. For children, lifelong friendships and animosities began in the schoolroom at Block; many students met and courted their future marriage partners there.

The parochial school stood with the church as a highly visible insti-
tution educating the young in the values and beliefs of the church and community. For most children, the authority and discipline of the church and school simply reinforced and maintained the cultural values espoused by the family and the community at large. Children learned important lessons for life, lessons that encompassed gender roles, authority, religious imperatives, literacy, and their place in the adult world. Formal education was pervasive, authoritarian, traditional, and total.