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## Reputation saves school

Word passed of its quality education as enrollment rose

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By Brian Tombaugh of The News-Sentinel

The Rev. Eric Malmstrom, principal at Zion Lutheran Academy, passes out tests. Members of Zion Lutheran Church recently voted to keep the school open, after fears it might close.

Faced with the possibility of closure just two years ago, Zion Lutheran Academy on South Hanna Street is here to stay.

"Two years ago, the congregation voted to keep the school open for another year," said the school's headmaster, the Rev. Eric Malmstrom. On Jan. 28, "they voted to keep it open indefinitely."

Zion, like many inner-city parochial schools, has seen student enrollment drop because of decreasing financial support.

"We had a rough couple years," said Malmstrom, who took over as headmaster in August. "We had about 87 students, and then we dropped way down."

The underlying cause is church membership, which has fallen from about 2,400 seven years ago to about 600 today, Malmstrom said. Members always funded scholarships for students who could not afford the tuition, and some sent their own children to the school. The church continues to support the school, and most of its students now come from the Hanna/Creighton neighborhoods.

Malmstrom, who also teaches at Zion, began the school year with a modest goal of having 30 students enrolled in pre-K through eighth grade. He ended up with 36.

"We thought, 'That's great,'" he said, but as the months passed, even without advertising, more and more students enrolled, bringing the total to 57. Malmstrom said word-of-mouth plays a large role. "It seems every time I turn around, my secretary tells me we've enrolled another student. We figure we must be doing something right."

Tim and Kimberlen Russell enrolled their children at the beginning of the school year after prompting from friends and relatives who insisted the school would be a good fit for their 9-year-old daughter, Timerah, and Kimberlen's 12-year-old son, Timothy.

"Since we've been there, we feel like it's just one big family," said Kimberlen Russell, an administrative assistant at a local public school. "Their education so far has been great."

Zion uses the trivium method, which focuses on teaching grammar, logic and rhetoric to students in their first few years of school. As students move into higher grades, they learn to apply that knowledge.

"Class sizes are so small. We can tailor things to individual students," said Malmstrom, who has taught Latin, science, math and religion at the school for the last three years. "We try to challenge those that are ahead and nurture those that are behind."

Each class has about 10 students. First- and second-graders, third- and fourth-graders, fifth- and sixth-graders, and seventh- and eight-graders share classrooms. About 20 pre-kindergarten students fill two more classrooms. Malmstrom says he hopes one day to have enough students to give each grade its own classroom. The school employs eight full- and part-time teachers and four administrative officials.

The Russells, who live in the Georgetown area, had their pick of parochial schools, but said the small class sizes, along with the school's friendly environment, attracted them to Zion.

"Smaller classes gives (teachers) more time to work with the child," said Tim Russell, a detective for the Fort Wayne Police Department. "Everybody wants their kids to have the best. I've been well-pleased and satisfied."

As enrollment rises, so do Malmstrom's expectations. "One of my future goals (is) to get state accreditation within the next five years," he said. "Enrollment was my big thing to take care of."

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### ***Zion Lutheran Academy***

***Where:*** 2313 St. Hanna St.

***Enrollment:*** 57 students in pre-K through eighth grade

***Staff:*** Eight full- and part-time teachers, including headmaster the Rev. Eric Malmstrom and four administrative officials

***Financial aid available?*** Yes

***For information and tuition:*** Call 745-2979