



Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Resources and Ideas

Back to School



The start of another new school year is fast approaching. Students return to the classroom and other fall schedules resume. Back to school provides an important opportunity to connect with students, teachers, parents, grandparents, and your community.

We pulled together a variety of resources and ideas for your congregation to consider as you plan how your community of faith will mark a new school year together.

For more information or other resources for ministry with children, youth, families, or young adults, contact Pastor Dan Fugate, Assistant to the Bishop for Discipleship, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, by email at dfugate@iksynod.org or by phone at (317) 253-3522.

Blessing of Backpacks

Many congregations incorporate a “Blessing of Backpacks” into worship as a way to ask for God’s blessing on a new school year. The blessing can take place at a point in the service that works best for your congregation: announcement time, during the prayers of intercession, just prior to the dismissal, or at any other time. Invite students to either stand or to come to the front of the sanctuary with their backpacks. One congregation in our synod uses this blessing:

All who are students this year, from preschool to college, please stand. Whether you brought a backpack or not, we want to bless you as you begin this new school year.

God of all knowledge and wisdom, these students and backpacks remind us that a new school year is about to begin. We ask for your blessing on them and upon all students, young and old, as they begin a new year. Help them discover and develop the gifts you have given them. And as they grow in knowledge, help them also grow in kindness and compassion, learning respect for themselves and for others. We ask for your blessing on parents and all those who care for these students. Strengthen them to surround these students with encouragement, support, and love. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Parents and other caregivers of these students, please stand and place a hand on your child, youth, or adult. Congregation, please stand and place your hand on a student, if there is one near enough, during the prayer.

Gracious God, you have promised to be present with your never-failing love and care. Remind us that wherever we go, you are always with us. Fill us all with the joy of learning new things so that we may be better equipped to be your servants in and to the world. Bless, O Lord, all those who stand with these students. Whatever their task or role, guide them to do it in love and faithfulness to you, knowing that even the most ordinary task becomes extraordinary when done in your name. We ask all things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette has written the hymn “God of All Learning” to accompany a Blessing of Backpacks service. The first stanza reads, “God of all learning, God of all knowing, we bring these backpacks filled with supplies. Bless all these tools of learning and growing. Use them, we pray, to change many lives.” The tune is BUNESSAN. Permission has been granted to reproduce the hymn for worship. To see the hymn or to download it, visit <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/god-of-all-learning>

Another blessing (provided by the United Methodist Church) that some congregations use is:

Leader:

Today, we have before us backpacks to be carried to and from school by the children and youth gathered here.

These backpacks will contain work to be done, work that's been returned, books to be studied, tools to complete homework. Notebooks, pencils, pens, protractors, compasses, crayons, rules, scissors, glue sticks and other items used for school work will find their way in and out of these backpacks.

Some days, so much stuff will fill these backpacks that the student may find it difficult to walk. Other days, they will be light and nearly empty. But on each and every day, these backpacks represent work required of the students gathered here. And, as in every aspect of our life, we bring these before God for blessing at this time.

Let us pray together:

Gracious God, we lift to you today, these students.

They stand here ready to receive your blessings and they commit themselves to study and learning in the school year ahead. We ask your blessing on each of them.

Further, we ask your blessing on these backpacks. They will hold the school work of each student and will be carried from home to school and back again. As these students carry these backpacks, may they be reminded of the love and care of this congregation that surrounds them each school day.

We pray as well for the teachers and administrators in our schools. May they also be sustained by your blessing. May they be reminded that this congregation embraces their call to teaching and learning, and surrounds them with love and care as well.

We pray in the name of Jesus, whom we seek to follow day by day. Amen.

Check out the Blessing of Backpacks used at Virginia Theological Seminary at <https://www.buildfaith.org/blessing-backpacks/>

You may wish to consider providing a token gift to students at the start of a new school year. Some ideas include: personal notes of encouragement, bag tags (you can do an internet search for “religious bag tags” to find ones available for purchase or make your own – see <https://www.buildfaith.org/blessing-of-the-backpacks-6-tips-for-success/>), school supplies, or do an internet search for any of these: “cross clip keychains,” “cross keychains,” “religious zipper pulls,” or “religious keychains.”

Some congregations use the Sunday of Blessing of Backpacks to host a Children, Youth, and Family Ministry Kickoff. You may wish to consider serving lunch, having games, crafts, or other fun activities that involve people of all ages. You could have students assemble a healthy snack mix which can be put into snack-size bags to be taken to school on the first day as a snack or included with the student’s lunch. This would also be a great

time to set up a prayer partner relationship between students and adult members of the congregation. You could also have students assemble “backpack first aid kits” which include a package of Kleenex, a few bandages, a couple of pieces of hard candy, and a small container of hand sanitizer or wet wipes in a sandwich size plastic bag.

If you have a Blessing of Backpacks, be sure to make the invitation as wide as possible so that families in your community know that they are welcome.

Relationships

The beginning of a new school year is a great time to check in with students and their families. You may wish to call families to confirm information, such as the grade each student will be in and what school they will attend. You may use this opportunity to invite families to a congregational event, such as the Blessing of Backpacks.

Posting a picture of students on the first day of school has become popular. Invite parents to post the picture of their student on your congregation’s Facebook or Instagram pages. (Remember that congregations should not post pictures of children without parental permission.)

Connect young people with the intergenerational community of faith. One congregation in our synod has put together a bulletin board with pictures of students, their names, and a schedule of their activities, such as swim meets for someone on the swim team, concerts for a student in orchestra, or play dates for a student in drama, so that congregational members can attend and show their support.

Research has shown that students need developmental relationships in all areas of their lives in order to thrive. To learn more about developmental relationships, visit <http://www.search-institute.org/research/developmental-relationships>

Encourage adult members of the congregation to engage with students at the start of a new school year. Sometimes it is helpful to provide some sample questions or conversation starters. As adults engage students at the start of a new school year, they could ask questions such as:

- When will you be starting back to school?
- What school will you be attending?
- What grade will you be starting?
- Have you met your teacher? What is his or her name?
- What are you looking forward to learning about this year?
- What did you enjoy the most this summer?
- How can I pray for you in the year ahead?

Partnership

Back to School is a great time to consider building a partnership with students, teachers, and schools in your community. Consider the following:

- **Collect school supplies.** Sometimes a social service agency in your community collects school supplies and then distributes them to those who have need. Consider collecting them in your congregation and then donating them. You could also check with an elementary school principal of a neighboring school to see if they have particular needs for their school. Often times, teachers provide supplies for students that do not have them and your congregation could make those available to teachers. They may also be in need of things like tissues, sanitizing wipes, dry erase markers, or other items for each classroom. The key here is to begin a relationship that is truly helpful.

- **Assemble school kits for Lutheran World Relief.** These are always needed and assist our brothers and sister across the globe. Instructions and more information can be found at www.buildkitsofcare.org
- **Adopt a school.** Talk with a school principal to see how you might serve the school on an ongoing basis. Some school districts have formal programs, others allow partnerships on an informal basis. You might be able to provide volunteers to help teachers set up their rooms in preparation for the new school year. You could provide a breakfast, lunch, or a sweet treat for teachers at special times throughout the year. The school might need hats or gloves for students without when cold weather hits. You might provide a pizza party once or twice a year as an incentive for students. The key here is to talk with the principal and see what might be helpful. The goal should be a long-term relationship between your congregation and the school rather than a one-time project. Keep in mind that you will not be able to “advertise” your congregation to the school, but will truly be “little Christs” to your neighbors. The Lewis Center for Church Leadership offers 50 Ways to Engage Local Schools at: <https://www.churchleadership.com/50-ways/50-ways-to-engage-local-schools/>
- **Provide books.** Reading is an important part of child development and education. Consider having a group from within the congregation purchase a book for each child in a classroom. The principal can suggest the names of books that would be appropriate.
- **Help feed children who are hungry on weekends.** Many communities have a program that provides food for children who receive free or reduced priced lunches at school to eat on the weekends. Consider how your congregation might participate. One such program that serves a number of school districts in Indiana and Kentucky is <http://www.blessingsinabackpack.org>

At Home

Here are some ideas to support faith formation in the home at the beginning of a new school year:

The book *For Everything A Season: 75 Blessings for Life's Milestones* has an order of the “Blessing for the New School Year” for use among family members at home. The book can be purchased here:

<http://store.milestonesministry.org/product-p/feas.htm>

Encourage parents to write a Bible verse on a piece of paper and include it in their child’s backpack or lunch bag. Use a verse like Joshua 1:9, “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” Some others you could use include: Psalm 23:1, Psalm 27:1, Psalm 37:5, Psalm 46:1, Psalm 119:105, Isaiah 43:1, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 28:20, John 3:16, John 8:12, John 14:6, John 10:27-28, John 14:27, John 15:5, Romans 8:28, Philippians 4:13.

They could also write a personal note and slip it in their child’s backpack or lunch bag. It could be a simple “I love you” and the child’s name. They can share an attribute they appreciate (“Jason, you are so kind!”), a promise to pray for them (“Katie, I am praying for you today.”), a hope for the new school year, or a talent or activity they enjoy doing with them.

What ideas do you have? How does your congregation mark the beginning of a new school year? Share your ideas with Pastor Dan Fugate (dfugate@iksynod.org) so that it can be shared with other congregations in our mission territory!