

Creating a Public Secondary School Program for a Religious and Cultural Minority:

An Innovative Collaboration with Conservative Mennonites, 1996–2012

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This thesis presents a historical review of the interactions between an Ontario public school board and three conservative Mennonite church groups between 1996 and 2012 to found a high school program that accommodated the Mennonites' beliefs and cultures. It is a critical consideration of how conservative Mennonite church groups, who were historically opposed to formal education beyond the age of fourteen, were able to collaborate with a public school board to found the Elmira Life and Work School (ELAWS) in Waterloo Region in Ontario. ELAWS, founded in 1996, is an innovative response to accommodation in the educational sphere. The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) was willing to re-think many assumptions regarding secondary schooling to establish ELAWS. These included an iconoclastic review of the five-day school week and the curriculum set by the province of Ontario. At the same time, several conservative Mennonite church groups were willing to enter into a period of self-examination. They decided they were willing to negotiate with a public school board, and that obtaining a secondary school diploma was worth risks that could result from stepping into the public domain. They were willing to test the school board to discover if they could be granted certain liberties. In the creation of the ELAWS program, we can see how a public school board and religious minority groups were able to compromise on the definition of secondary education. They were able to create an unprecedented educational model, one that could be applied in other jurisdictions.

This thesis, as a case study of one secondary school, contributes to a broader understanding of how groups with particular views of education can be accommodated within Ontario's public school system. This thesis offers an original perspective on the benefits that may be realized when Ontario's public school system collaborates with conservative Mennonite communities. While previous studies have examined relationships between public school boards and conservative Mennonite students in

elementary school, this is the first study to investigate secondary schooling. This research could provide a framework for other religious minority groups who would like to engage with a secondary school system to create a program that would benefit all stakeholders. Other authors have conducted research about Low German Mennonites and their interaction with public education, but none have looked into the decisions that were made to accommodate three different groups of conservative Mennonite students, each with divergent needs, in one program. The example provided by ELAWS may hold significant implications for the study of educational accommodations in Canada.

ELAWS was developed because of several factors. These included provincial authorities enforcing Ontario education laws that required youth to attend school until age sixteen; recognition by conservative Mennonite community members that a grade twelve diploma was becoming the minimum requirement for job opportunities; and most important, the deepening of trust between an Ontario public school board and the conservative Mennonite community.

The research reported in this thesis is based on primary source materials, field research and oral interviews with several stakeholders. The stakeholders include WRDSB staff, parents of ELAWS students, and former ELAWS students.

The first chapter provides an overview of the significance of the founding of ELAWS and an introduction to the three conservative Mennonite groups initially involved in the program. Chapter 2 includes a review of the history of conservative Mennonite education in Canada. The third chapter explores a group of conservative Mennonites who are identified as belonging to the Low-German-speaking Mennonite community. This chapter reviews that community's perspective on formal education and offers reactions from that community toward secondary schooling. Chapter 4 examines the reasons why some groups within the conservative Mennonite community sought out the public school board as a solution to the challenges of meeting minimal requirements for apprenticeship

training, the rising cost of farmland, and the increased technical knowledge required in running twenty-first century technology.

Chapter 5 reviews tensions that grew within certain conservative Mennonite communities relating to public education starting in 2012. The chapter explores the movement away from the acceptance of public education and towards a major adaptation in which the conservative church groups began founding secondary school programs of their own, following the ELAWS model.

Acknowledgements

Many people have been involved in this project. I have been fortunate to be welcomed into the homes and workplaces of a variety of people in the conservative Mennonite community. My co-workers, both past and present, have been generous with their time and knowledge.

I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Marlene Epp, for her guidance and expertise. Dr. Adam Crerar and Dr. Troy Osborne asked pertinent questions that clarified the relevance of my findings.

My daughters, Alanna, Fiona, Marielle, and Sylvie, have been patient over the years, and have understood my limited time, as both they and I worked toward a myriad of degrees. My husband, Mark, has embraced my studies, years after he earned his MSc (Oxon), a previous family adventure. My extended family and friends encouraged me through their interest. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the wider history community. This includes both the history community in the Tri-University system, which includes the University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph, and the history community that exists beyond these post-secondary institutions in Southwestern Ontario's public sphere. I truly enjoy my interactions with others who love history, and I love sharing their learning through classes, conferences, and community events.

Kryisia Lear, an editor with The Editorial Suite, provided copy and stylistic editing services.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Lorne and Grace Kelsey, both teachers and my parents. They filled our home with reference books, stopped the car at every historical marker in Canada, volunteered with the Scarborough Historical Society, and encouraged me and my three sisters, Karen, Elin and Alison, to love learning, and to see the value in pursuing a never-ending education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On a warm June evening in 2012, twenty-nine Mennonite students celebrated their graduation from an Ontario high school program recently created just for them. They laughingly entered the Lions Hall to be met by their smiling teachers. The boys were wearing dress pants and a few wore ties. Some girls wore long simple cape dresses in colourfully patterned fabrics, while others wore dark dresses. Almost all the girls wore a covering over their hair. The students were first in line at long buffet tables laden with salads and cheese trays, all provided by their parents. There was no background music, but there was a slide show with photos of each student at school and at their jobs. Almost three hundred people, including parents, siblings, extended family members and friends, were at the celebration to support them. Having a high school graduate in the family was a new experience for almost everyone in attendance, and it was a good reason to celebrate.¹

ELAWS and its Stakeholder Groups

Elmira Life and Work School (ELAWS), the focus of this thesis, is a publicly funded educational program designed and delivered for conservative Mennonite students. Studying the ELAWS program provides insight about how educational accommodations can support a religious group or groups in obtaining formal education. In this instance, both religious and public stakeholders compromised on their religious and educational dogma to address their common interest—providing young people in Ontario with the brightest possible future.

1. Based on personal observation of author. I was employed by the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) as a secondary school teacher for thirty-six years, with thirty-four years at Elmira District Secondary School. I worked exclusively in the ELAWS program for nine years, where I taught grades nine through twelve and many subjects, including Co-operative Education, Family Studies, English, Geography, Technology, and Physical Education. The anecdotes throughout this thesis describe events I witnessed between 2009 and 2012.

As of 2011, Ontario had a population of 59,000 self-identified Mennonites, of which approximately 10,000, were conservative Mennonites.² The religious stakeholders in this thesis are all conservative Mennonites in the Region of Waterloo. They are members of the Low German Mennonite (Low German) community; the Markham-Waterloo Mennonite (Markham-Waterloo) community; and the Midwest Mennonite Fellowship (Midwest Fellowship) community. These groups have historically been reluctant to engage with formal secondary education systems and public institutions. This thesis investigates the groups' awareness of the need for further formal education for financial stability and personal fulfillment. It additionally provides information about changing cultural norms within conservative Mennonite groups found in the region.

The public stakeholder most impacted by ELAWS is a large institutional entity, a public school board. This thesis demonstrates how the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) strove to be accommodating to the needs of the religious groups identified above. The ELAWS program was designed, developed and delivered through Elmira District Secondary School (EDSS).

As a specialized program in a public secondary school, some of the stakeholders from EDSS thought that access to participation should not be limited to specific religious groups. Therefore, the name ELAWS, which emphasizes work, was chosen and no religious affiliation is mentioned. There does not seem to be a firm date for the introduction of the name ELAWS, and for some years the program continued to be referred to informally as the Mennonite program. In this thesis I have used the name ELAWS throughout all the time periods.

2. Marlene Epp, "Who are the Mennonites?" adapted from *Mennonites in Ontario* (Waterloo: The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 2012), <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/academics/continuing/institute-anabaptist-and-mennonite-studies/who-are-mennonites>.

While offering a case study of one secondary school program, this thesis suggests opportunities for engagement across cultural and religious groups. The interactions between the stakeholders and the invention of a new model for secondary education are explored.

Thesis Question and Brief Answer

The growth of ELAWS created tensions within both the Mennonite communities and the WRDSB. The tensions that arose and how they were dealt with are examined through this thesis.

The question I attempt to answer is this: has the conservative Mennonite understanding of public secondary education moved from rejection to acceptance? My research indicates that there is no firm answer to this question. Some conservative Mennonites have chosen to accept public education; some have rejected it. There are different rates of acceptance between church groups and between genders and even within individual families. Some people have never engaged in public education, and likely never will. However, others have left the sheltered confines of the ELAWS program and entered the mainstream high school program.

Rates of acceptance of formal education among conservative Mennonite families are important to study because the choices that parents make for their children's education are significant. They will determine the job opportunities their children can explore, the friendships their children will make and the culture their children will live in.³

Methodology: Sources and Approach

A review of the literature on the history of conservative Mennonites and education guided this study. Data was collected through oral interviews, additional primary source research, and an examination of relevant literature.

3. Frank H. Epp and Lyle Friesen. "Educational Institutions and Cultural Retention in Canada: The Mennonite Experience." (Canadian Historical Association, London: University of Western Ontario, 1978), 14.

Several historians have written about the schooling of the Low German migrants from Mexico and Latin America, who are often referred to as Old Colony Mennonites, the name of the most conservative of their church groups. The Low Germans who attend ELAWS also belong to other churches, including evangelical churches in the Elmira area. Some families attend no church.⁴

No historical review has been done of a public secondary school developed for other conservative Mennonite church groups in tandem with the Low German. No previously published research examines the role of the public secondary school in the lives of conservative Mennonites in Ontario.

The main source of information for this thesis was oral interviews with individuals who were stakeholders in the ELAWS program between 1996 and 2012. The interviews were conducted with twenty-two individuals between 2017 and 2018, and content analysis of the notes completed.

The interviewees included four parents of past and present ELAWS students. The three male parents were members of the ELAWS parent council and a representative of one of the three founding church groups. The fourth parent was a woman, selected for the different perspective she would bring and because her children were involved in the program for over fourteen years. Six former ELAWS students, male and female, and representative of the three church groups, were interviewed, along with a former member of the Midwest Fellowship, who now identifies as a non-Mennonite.⁵

To gain the perspective of the WRDSB staff, I interviewed two attendance counsellors/social workers, a principal/superintendent, a superintendent, a guidance counsellor, and seven teachers, who

4. "In 2004 one historian suggested that 60 per cent of Low German immigrants to Canada chose to have no religious affiliation." Samuel J. Steiner, "The Explosive Growth of the Old Colony Mennonites," Abstract. April 13, 2015, in *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 2015), <https://ontariomennonitehistory.org/2015/04/13/the-explosive-growth-of-the-old-colony-mennonites/>.

5. The WRDSB Research Review Committee allowed me to speak to former students because they were adults and no longer involved with ELAWS at the time of this study. Permission was granted in September 2016.

represented a wide range of viewpoints. The WRDSB staff members served in different years, had different occupational specialties, and focused on varying aspects of the program. All of the parents and staff members interviewed were directly connected with the development of the ELAWS program.

The interviews ranged from one half hour to two and a half hours. All of them were conducted in English and recorded using a computer. The sound files will be archived at the University of Waterloo. The interviews were held in homes, businesses, libraries, over the phone, and at EDSS. I guided the interviews by asking pre-determined, open-ended questions, designed to be appropriate for the role the interviewee played in the development of ELAWS.⁶ I asked clarifying questions when needed, and often asked for elaboration upon important points and dates. Oftentimes, the interviewee offered helpful or confidential information beyond the scope of the original questions. I named the interviewees who allowed their names to be used and provided culturally appropriate pseudonyms for those who preferred that option.

Oral history and its usage are important for uncovering and preserving the stories of individuals and topics that would not be revealed in other sources. In writing the history of a public school program for conservative Mennonite groups, there are no secondary sources, and consequently, oral history interviews form the most important primary source materials. Writing in 1978, social historian Robert F. Harney argued that oral history would recognize “history from the bottom up” and allow groups of people, including those joined by a common religion, to add their important voices to historical records.⁷

Historian Alexander Freund suggests that the historian should decide which type of interview would be most appropriate. In this thesis, Freund’s focused interviews, which look for information

6. See Appendix D, interview scripts for oral history interviews.

7. Robert F. Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* (Toronto: Historical Society of Ontario, 1978), 8.

about a specific topic, are most applicable.⁸ By interviewing twenty-two different people, and asking about similar time periods, with scripted questions for each group, it was possible to gather information about the points of intersection where memories overlapped and where they differed.

One issue within oral history practice is the problem of shared authority between the researcher (the interviewer), and the interviewee. According to Steven High, university-based researchers control the research undertaken and the questions posed and have a monopoly over the resulting interpretation of the sources.⁹ He asks, "If the researcher is sharing authority, who speaks on behalf of the community?" He also asks, "Can we assume that people are of one mind within a group?"¹⁰ These were among the questions that I grappled with while conducting this research.

By choosing men who had volunteered to be on the ELAWS parent council, I was interviewing men who were willing to represent both themselves and their communities in interactions with the school board representatives. I did not interview parents who had withdrawn their children from the program or chose never to engage with public secondary education in the first place, because I was primarily interested in learning how a variety of people with varying backgrounds were able to co-operate to form a new school model. I was interviewing subjects who agreed to the interview process. While no one openly refused to be interviewed, one former student, now working as the principal of a parochial school, did not return any of my phone calls; his silence, as I understood it, indicated his refusal to be interviewed.

Finally, the oral historian must try to remain objective during the interview.¹¹ As the interviewer I had a voice that could influence the results. I was an insider when interviewing some of

8. Alexander Freund, *Oral History and Ethnic History* (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 2014), 306–307.

9. Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 9.

10. Steven High, "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009):14.

11. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 5.

the former staff. An “insider” perspective, while perhaps lacking some openness or objectivity, may have given me the insight to know where to look, or as historian Hasia Diner puts it, have “access to knowledge” that others would have had to do mountains of research to find.¹² However, I was an outsider when speaking with staff from before 2009 who were instrumental in first developing the program. I was an outsider when interviewing students who attended ELAWS before 2009, but I was both an insider and an outsider when interviewing the selected parents.

While I was not a part of any conservative Mennonite community, I had met the parents many times, over many years, in my role as a Co-operative Education (co-op) teacher who visited their homes, farms, and businesses. These long-term relationships allowed me to conduct field research without feelings of constraint. I was able to move freely between the world of the school and the world of the conservative Mennonites, following along as the students did their chores in the dairy barn at 6:30 am, attending evening choir performances in Midwest Fellowship churches, and observing the preparation for a “quilting” in a Markham-Waterloo home. I enjoyed sitting down to dinner in a Midwest Fellowship farm kitchen at noon hour and watching Low German mothers baking buns and making homemade noodles with their daughters. I watched their husbands and sons weld and assemble machinery. I purchased cabinetry and furniture, maple syrup, freshly butchered meat, Christmas cookies, and baskets of fruit from the students and their parents. These personal connections led to a feeling of companionship during the interviews; we had shared experiences and, often had similar memories.

To acknowledge the time and effort the interviewees devoted to answering questions, the results of these interviews will be available to the conservative Mennonite church communities, the WRDSB, and the University of Waterloo. As oral historians Andrew Shaffer and Linda Shopes have

12. Hasia Diner, “Insights and Blind Spots: Writing History for Inside and Outside,” in *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, eds. Kimberly Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble, and Steven D. Reschly, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 21–38.

written, “we need to put oral history to work in the present to inform and inspire, to give depth and meaning to everyday experiences, to engage with and support broader issues and concerns.”¹³ I found this point of view to be helpful in organizing my own thinking about the use of oral history results. I made the decision that the stories should also be shared with the community, including the general public and local historical societies.

My second major type of primary sources was print artifacts. These include insider sources such as minutes from department meetings, memos and emails between staff members, conference notes, student projects and attendance lists.¹⁴ Other sources were more readily available to the public; these included ELAWS yearbooks, newsletters sent to parents, ELAWS promotional pamphlets, Mennonite Central Committee pamphlets, newspaper articles and newspaper advertisements.¹⁵

I reference *The Blackboard Bulletin*, a journal produced for Old Order Mennonite, conservative Mennonite, and Amish parents and teachers on aspects of elementary schooling. The absence of information related to secondary schooling indicates the lack of such schools. It is an influential publication for families who do not subscribe to many other journals and do not use televisions to gather information.¹⁶

I did not find an ongoing Old Colony Mennonite newsletter for the local area in either English or German. I did read eighty-four issues of the Markham-Waterloo Mennonite newsletter, *The Church Correspondent*, which appeared monthly. It had references to formal education, but they were mainly related to the history of Mennonite schooling, and not current events.

13. Andrew Shaffer and Linda Shopes. “Reflections on the ‘Urge to Collect.’” Oxford University Press Blog, 2015. blog.oup.com/2015/03/linda-shopos-oral-history-curation/.

14. These print artefacts were either in my possession or given to me by the stakeholders connected to ELAWS. In each case I received permission to use the material.

15. These print artefacts were either in my possession or available to the public through school mailings, newspaper articles, and the school library.

16. Shane Martin, “Gender and Parochial Schooling Among the Plain Mennonites of Ontario,” (Unpublished paper, University of Waterloo, 2011), 17.

I read the forty-two issues of *The Midwest Mennonite Focus* published between 2005 and 2012; it is published bimonthly by the Midwest Fellowship. Because the Midwest Fellowship is a rapidly growing church group with many young people, I expected to find articles by Midwest Fellowship writers related to formal education and schooling. So it was surprising to find only one short mention of schooling, whether elementary or secondary, public or private. A 2008 article had a brief reference to a case in Quebec where Holdeman Mennonite schools were shut down for not following the provincial curriculum, particularly in regard to evolution and sex education (both phrases mentioned specifically) and for not having certified teachers. The article concluded with the editorial admonition that Christian schools should be supported, because “the privileges that you enjoy presently should be appreciated and used fully.”¹⁷

The limited amount of editorial comment in either church newsletter led me to suspect, which would be confirmed during the interviews, that attendance in a specific school setting was a difficult subject for the church leaders to address without causing dissent. They did not publicly acknowledge the ELAWS program, and left the matter of high school attendance to the discretion of individual families. From my understanding, it appeared that each church group chose to place boundaries around the topics they considered to be suitable for general discussion, and formal education was not included.

Importance of this Thesis

This thesis is significant because the ELAWS program appears to be unique in the history of education in Canada. It is the first program designed to meet the needs of a public secondary school system and three different groups within a religious minority, conservative Mennonites. ELAWS may be particularly instructive as a model for supporting specific communities in their interactions with

17. Howard G. Bea, “Christian School Privileges May Terminate,” *Midwest Mennonite Focus*, 29, no. 4, (July–August 2008): 4.

public education systems which are endeavouring to be responsive and relevant within a society that is growing in diversity and pluralism.

The information gathered here may serve as a model for future public school programs designed to accommodate religious minorities. The findings could be used to aid any public school board that wishes to accommodate a particular religious group, with varying levels of orthodoxy, and different languages, in one school program. For instance, diverse Indigenous groups who feel marginalized in public education systems may benefit from a program that responds to and values their individual cultures. Other minority religious groups could benefit from the flexibility exhibited by the ELAWS model. For example, some Muslim parents in Ontario, like the conservative Mennonites, have concerns about their place in the public school system.

The data collected within the conservative Mennonite community, documenting the opening of a specialized secondary school program, provides information about these isolated communities and modernity. This study offers a lens to examine the thinking and decisions of specific religious groups and the practices of a school board in attempting to accommodate them.

Historian Royden Loewen, an authority on Mennonite studies, declared, “finding ways to analyze the nature of a community solely to understand how it has survived, adapted, and reinvented itself should always be a historian’s central mission.”¹⁸ This case study of the ELAWS program demonstrates Loewen’s point. As a unique educational experiment and a community unto itself, ELAWS is a worthwhile topic for an historical review.

18. Royden Loewen, “Village Among the Nations: Low German Migrants and the Idea of Transnationalism in the History of Mennonites in Canada.” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2015). <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/winter-2015/village-among-nations-low-german-migrants-and-idea>.

Chapter 2: Historical Background

On a beautiful day in early June, a conservative Mennonite woman drove her black van to the door of Elmira District Secondary School (EDSS), arriving a little before the closing bell so that she could pick up her son. Her fifteen-year-old came to school two days a week and he worked on his home farm the rest of the time. He practised a life of simplicity. The woman waited patiently, but as she watched the students she grew upset. To her consternation, here at the public high school her son was surrounded by young women wearing almost no clothes. She saw girls in shorts no longer than their underwear and tops that barely reached their waist. She had seen enough.¹⁹

On that day, the conservative Mennonite mother walked into the school office and withdrew her son from grade nine. It did not matter that he was a top student earning high marks, or that the school year was almost over and he would lose his credits if he left without finishing the year. What mattered most to her was removing her son immediately from the worldly school and the negative influence of public schooling. This reaction of the mother and son is just one of many rejections of the public education system by conservative Mennonites in the history of educating their children in Canada.

This chapter examines the similarities and differences between conservative Mennonite groups in the Region of Waterloo, gives a brief history of Mennonite education, and provides historical examples of the conservative Mennonite rejection of public and secondary education, including the reasons for opposition to schooling beyond the age of fourteen. I will examine the school consolidation issue in Ontario and the issues that arose from the passing of the Manitoba School Act. The chapter also addresses the importance of teacher certification, from the point of view of different governments and conservative Mennonites.

19. Personal observation of author.

Mennonite Communities: Similarities and Differences

Diversity has always been a part of the Mennonite community, tradition and identity. Nonetheless, Mennonites share common beliefs, including adult baptism, non-violence, non-conformity, and simplicity.²⁰ They emphasize the separation of church and state. The early Mennonites did not completely reject government, for they saw that the “work and office of government are utterly necessary in the world, but they are not necessary for the Christian.”²¹ The Mennonites wanted to live separately from society with special arrangements for the formal education of their children.²² These beliefs have their origins in the emergence of Mennonites as a distinct religious group.

On January 21, 1525, in Zurich, Switzerland, Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, and George Baurock, all early Anabaptist leaders, re-baptized themselves as adults, and thus set themselves against the dominant religions of the time, which believed in infant baptism.²³ These three learned men provided leadership for only two years, from 1525 to 1527, before they were banished or killed for their Anabaptist beliefs.²⁴ Menno Simons, who came from the Low Countries and had been educated as a Catholic priest, emerged as the leader of this radical reform movement in 1536.²⁵

Although they themselves were highly educated, the first Mennonite leaders thought the learned doctors of the church and universities resorted to complicated doctrinal arguments as a strategy to avoid the plain and simple teachings of Jesus. The Mennonites wanted to follow only

20. Douglas Ray Zook, “Social Studies, Teaching and Mennonites: An Interesting Alliance” (M.Ed. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1995), 7–14.

21. William Janzen, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite, and Doukhobor Communities in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 6.

22. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 1.

23. Anabaptists, whose religious beliefs emphasize believers’ baptism, were the precursors of Mennonites. Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), x.

24. Conrad Grebel had been educated at the University of Vienna and the University of Paris. He was a master of Greek and wrote Latin fluently. Menno Simons, although of peasant roots, knew Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Conservative Mennonites have opposed higher learning since the early deaths of their first leaders. E.G. Kaufman, “Pioneers in Mennonite Education,” *Mennonite Life* (January 1962): 16, in Catherine Falconer Lichty, “Between Two Paradigms: The Canadian Mennonite Philosophy of Education” (master’s thesis, University of Toronto, 1986)18.

25. Kaufman, 16, in Catherine Falconer Lichty, 19.

Jesus, and rejected the power of the state to enforce religious conformity.²⁶ As a result they were persecuted, as recorded in *Martyrs Mirror*.²⁷ The Anabaptists, seeking safety, fled from Switzerland to many parts of Europe, including the Netherlands and Russia. This began more than four centuries of migration as the Mennonites attempted to guard their identity.²⁸

In the late 1600s, the Swiss-south German Mennonites from England and Europe settled in Pennsylvania.²⁹ In the new land the Mennonites finally experienced the freedom to express their religious beliefs. They could shape societies for themselves without the risk of being killed. After the American Revolution in 1776, two thousand Swiss-south German Mennonites left Pennsylvania and entered Canada, specifically Ontario.³⁰

In 1808 Bishop Benjamin Eby, aided by others, was the first Ontario Mennonite to build a school in Berlin, Ontario.³¹ By 1816 the Upper Canada government was providing this school with some financial assistance, though this "common school," or public elementary school, remained under the control of the local school board, which included Mennonite men.³² Some of the early settlers preferred no government involvement in their schools, which they felt was an intrusion into their value system.³³ They wanted to be able to direct the curriculum as they chose.³⁴

The first Mennonite schools in Ontario avoided any teaching beyond the basics. They affirmed that the agrarian lifestyle they had practised in Europe and Pennsylvania suited them and they recognized agriculture as "the foundation of civilization. More than just a way of making a

26. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 5.

27. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror 1660* (Canada: n.p., 1945), 165–194.

28. David V. Wiebe, *They Seek a Country*, (Freeman: Pine Hill Press, Second Edition, 1974), 221.

29. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920*, 42.

30. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920*, 50.

31. Samuel J. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 2015), 78.

32. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands*, 78.

33. Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920: The History of a Separate People*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974, 84.

34. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920*, 85.

living, agriculture was for them a way of life.”³⁵ The conservative Mennonites in the Region of Waterloo remain both rurally based and primarily tradespeople, farmers and homemakers, like their ancestors.

The three main groups of conservative Mennonites who attend ELAWS are the Low German, the Markham-Waterloo and the Midwest Fellowship. The Low German, who originated in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century,³⁶ left the Low Countries for Prussia, and then moved to Russia in 1789.³⁷ They were enticed to immigrate when Russia offered a twenty-point *Privilegium* that included complete freedom of religious practice and education for all time, for both the immigrants and their ancestors.³⁸ This allowed the Mennonites to retain their own way, for as Terpstra noted, they had “isolated themselves from ‘the world’ in self-sufficient agricultural communities...”³⁹ However, in 1870 the Mennonite *Privilegium* was cancelled, and the Russian state forced children to use Russian in school.⁴⁰ As a result, approximately 7000 Mennonites moved from South Russia to Canada, specifically Manitoba and Saskatchewan, between 1874 and 1877.⁴¹

The Canadian government was offering them what they had lost in Russia.⁴² Canada promised the Mennonites that they could have complete control of their schools and churches, and could retain the German language (High German) for their schools.⁴³ However, just as in Russia, laws were passed in Manitoba in 1890 and 1916, which removed the use of the German language in both public

35. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 1786–1920, 74.

36. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 1786–1920, 34.

37. Epp, and Friesen, 1.

38. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 7.

39. Nicholas Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World: An Alternative History of the Reformation* (Toronto: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 101.

40. Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870–1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 11.

41. Cornelius Krahn and H. Leonard Sawatzky, "Old Colony Mennonites" 1990 update in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Old_Colony_Mennonites&oldid=1412472018.

42. Canada was keen to support immigration and develop the agricultural potential of the prairies. Manitoba joined the Canadian confederation in 1870, Saskatchewan in 1905.

43. Ens, 20.

and private school curricula.⁴⁴ The Low German, therefore, moved to Mexico and Latin America in the 1920s, seeking to offer schooling in German, set their own curriculum and hire their own teachers.

Eventually, due to severe poverty in Mexico, some of the Low German immigrated to Canada in the late twentieth century, but as individual families, rather than as a church group.⁴⁵ Between 50,000 and 60,000 Mennonites in Canada originated from colonies in Mexico and Latin America and comprise 20 percent of all Mennonites in Canada.⁴⁶ The Low German in the Region of Waterloo, particularly those who attend the conservative Old Colony Mennonite churches, remain traditional in their viewpoints. The immigrants from Mexico and Latin America speak *Plautdietsch* (Low German in English), a dialect from the lowlands of northern Germany and the Netherlands.⁴⁷ Almost all of the Low German students in the ELAWS program use *Plautdietsch* at home and High German at church. Some of their parents are unable to speak or write in English, while others are fluent, particularly in spoken English.

The Low German of the 1990s felt the same way as their ancestors did about schooling: they were wary of public schools. Isaak M. Dyck wrote, “The public school pointed to Anglo-Canadianism rather than German Mennonitism, to urbanization rather than the rural life....The public school pointed in the direction of other unwanted ‘worldly’ influences and, what was worst of all, social integration and ultimate assimilation.”⁴⁸ The Low German Mennonites were afraid of the

44. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 91–92.

45. William Janzen, *Build Up One Another: The Work of MCCO with the Mennonites from Mexico in Ontario 1977–1997*, (Kitchener: Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, 1998), 5.

46. Luann Good Gingrich, *Out of Place: Social Exclusion and Mennonite Migrants in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 16.

47. Barb Draper, *The Mennonites of St. Jacobs and Elmira: Understanding the Variety* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2010), 309–310.

48. Isaak M. Dyck, *Die Auswanderung der Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde von Canada nach Mexiko* (Cuauhtemoc, Mexiko: Imprenta Colonial, 1971), 43–44, in Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940*, 100.

power and control of the people beyond their communities. They did not want their children exposed to the wider world.

The Markham-Waterloo and Midwest Fellowship developed from Old Order Mennonites who had their roots in Switzerland and came to Canada, via Pennsylvania, beginning in the late eighteenth century. In Ontario, progressive and traditionalist Mennonites split in 1889. The traditionalists chose to maintain the old ways, albeit with a wide degree of variation in orthodoxy, and became known as Old Order Mennonites. They are a “rural Mennonite subgroup that lives apart from society and opts not to follow many of its modern technologies, including motorized transportation.”⁴⁹ This group is often recognized by their use of horse and buggies.⁵⁰

The Markham-Waterloo Conference was formed in 1939, after Mennonites in Markham and in the Elmira area had a reasonably amicable split with the Old Order Mennonites over several issues, including the Markham and Elmira group’s desire to use cars, telephones and electricity.⁵¹ Despite this adoption of technology, which the traditionalists consider to be prideful, the Markham-Waterloo consider themselves to be “Old Order” in outlook and theology and the women continue to follow a plain dress code.⁵²

The Markham-Waterloo mainly attend parochial schools alongside the Old Order Mennonites, sharing small schools with two or three classrooms at most, and with teachers who have a grade eight education.⁵³ Both church groups are comfortable with a “rudimentary education geared to simple farm living.”⁵⁴

49. Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, x.

50. See Appendix C: Ontario Mennonite Theological Typology, in Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands*, 474.

51. Draper, 194, 259

52. Draper, 194, 259.

53. Shane Martin, 27.

54. Royden Loewen, *Horse and Buggy Genius: Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 10.

The Markham-Waterloo attitude toward public secondary education is illustrated in the following editorial by Allan Martin in *The Church Correspondent*, which appeared in 2012. The author quotes from the Bible to caution against too much schooling, and he mentions local programs, which would include ELAWS.

Our forefathers were not wrong in taking a stand against continued education. The apostle Paul also advises Timothy against the same. In II Timothy 3:7 he says, “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

This may sound like I am completely opposed to any education beyond elementary. This is not the case. There is definitely a time when it is beneficial and there are some respectable programs around. However, in my mind there are also spiritual risks tied in with continued education.⁵⁵

While some Markham-Waterloo students attend ELAWS after elementary school, the Old Order Mennonites do not attend any secondary school.

The Midwest Fellowship, a coalition of individual congregations, arose from a split with the Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario (CMCO) Mennonites in 1978.⁵⁶ The coalition grew out of an event in which a number of churches joined to create the Maranatha Bible School in Michigan.⁵⁷

55. Allan Martin, Editorial, *The Church Correspondent* Vol. LVII, No. 10, (October 2012): 5.

56. The Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario (CMCO) was founded in 1960 by two congregations, the Heidelberg Mennonite Fellowship (now Countryside Mennonite Fellowship) and the New Hamburg Mennonites. In 1978, Heidelberg Mennonite Fellowship withdrew from the CMCO because it wanted more congregational autonomy and less rigid regulations on dress and other items.

http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Conservative_Mennonite_Church_of_Ontario&oldid=135414

57. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands*, 509.

The Midwest Fellowship is slightly less traditional in its practices and dress codes than other conservative groups, although the women do wear cape dresses and hair coverings. There is a strong emphasis on missions, evangelism and personal spirituality. The largest geographic concentration of Midwest Fellowship members is found around Elmira, Ontario. The male members have a variety of occupations, particularly in practical trades; while the ideal is a trade related to agriculture, the occupations have expanded to include jobs such as construction, mechanics and machinists. It is typically expected that mothers will remain at home, since children are considered a mother's first priority.⁵⁸ In 2011, the Midwest Fellowship had 1027 members in Ontario.⁵⁹ These members were spread among ten congregations.⁶⁰

While the Midwest Fellowship allows greater input from lay members in comparison to the more conservative churches such as the Markham-Waterloo, they have similar opinions regarding elementary schooling. "The Midwest Mennonite Fellowship members do not want to be conformed to the world and so they operate their own schools..."⁶¹ This position has changed somewhat in the early twenty-first century, and while the majority attend private parochial schools, some children from each church group attend public elementary schools.⁶²

Both the Markham-Waterloo and the Midwest Fellowship conservative Mennonites embrace aspects of the modern world; for instance, most have cell phones and computers, but do not own a television, which is prohibited.⁶³

Some members of the Markham-Waterloo and the Midwest Fellowship speak a Pennsylvania German dialect (known colloquially as Pennsylvania Dutch) in their homes and may sing in High

58. Draper, 305–308.

59. Dan Schrock, and Howard Bean, "Midwest Mennonite Fellowship," (December 2011) Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Midwest_Mennonite_Fellowship&oldid=137115

60. Schrock and Bean, "Midwest Mennonite Fellowship."

61. Draper, 308.

62. Personal observation of author.

63. Personal observation of author.

German in formal church services.⁶⁴ While most of the Markham-Waterloo students in this study can speak Pennsylvania German, they speak English at home and at school. However, many of the Midwest Fellowship students cannot speak Pennsylvania German. The church services for both groups are held in English, and their newsletters are printed in English.

While the wider world may have looked upon all Mennonites as a single assemblage, they themselves are well aware of the enduring boundaries between each group.

Conservative Mennonite Education in the Region of Waterloo

In the twenty-first century, conservative Mennonites considered the possibility of their children having secondary schooling, but, like their ancestors, they favoured church-run schools for formal education. One option for obtaining a formal education is Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, the only Mennonite secondary school in the Region of Waterloo, which was created for progressive Mennonites and was in the city of Kitchener, far from their rural homes.

Another option is ELAWS, the topic of this thesis. ELAWS, which began in 1996, is a fully funded program within EDSS in the WRDSB. ELAWS hosts students from a variety of conservative Mennonite groups. The program is taught by provincially qualified teachers, and students have the opportunity to obtain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

Conservative Mennonite parents became interested in the possibility of secondary education as they accepted that there was a societal movement toward further formalized education, with grade twelve being the minimum requirement⁶⁵ for entry into the skilled trades. In addition, jobs in agriculture, manufacturing shops and retail locations required advanced formalized education. But the parents still had deep reservations about the public school system in Ontario. They had left it in the

64. J. Winfield Fretz, *The Waterloo Mennonites: A Community in Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press for Conrad Grebel College, 1989), 60–62.

65. Glen Lichty (parent), interview by author, his home, Alma, March 31, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

1960s, when small rural schools with local representation on the school boards were closed and the students were sent to consolidated schools in towns.

At the same time, another factor in the development of ELAWS was the low high school graduation rate at EDSS. Conservative Mennonite students who had attended local public elementary schools were tracked by the province. When these students did not continue to secondary school, they were assumed to be dropouts, which reflected badly on EDSS. The WRDSB was expected to obey education laws within Ontario, which had evolved to reflect the sentiment of the times. Beginning in 1891 all children between the ages of eight and fourteen were expected to attend school. In 1919 the *Education Act* was amended to state that students could not leave school before the age of sixteen,⁶⁶ a law which existed until 2006. During this era, some of the conservative Mennonite children from the Low German, the Markham-Waterloo and the Midwest Fellowship were enrolled in public elementary schools, but were leaving school at age fourteen. The school board sought a way to retain those students, while not contesting the rights of parents who wished to educate their own children. The small rural public elementary schools were particularly interested in a compromise to meet the interests of both the school board and the parents.

In pursuit of a compromise, the WRDSB strove to find an intersection between the desires of the parents, and the educational requirements in the *Education Act* of the government of Ontario. EDSS, in the heart of the Mennonite population area, went about trying to create a plan that could satisfy all stakeholders.

Opposition to Schooling Beyond the End of Grade Eight

A long-standing opposition to any schooling beyond the age of fourteen has existed in both Canada and the United States, and many Mennonite and Amish authors forcefully argue against

66. Canada. Ontario. Legislative Assembly. *Journals*, 14th Parl., 5th sess., 1919. <http://www.ontla.on.ca/library/repository/ser/23347/v053-1919-145.pdf>

public and secondary schooling for conservative Mennonites. There was a general consensus among the authors and in the community that conservative Mennonites do not want an education they cannot use in their daily lives. As well, they fear that higher education will cause their children to challenge and doubt the faith and values they have been brought up with. As a result many conservative Mennonites reject higher education. Here are cases which will assist in understanding the conservative Mennonite response to secondary education.

Although conservative Mennonites in Ontario have not been forced to attend public secondary schools, as they have been at times in the United States, they share many of the same attitudes toward education with the Old Order Amish in the United States.⁶⁷ In 1937, when Ohio tried to coerce Amish teenagers to attend high school by threatening to imprison their parents if they did not, one Amish spokesman explained, “We’re not opposed to education...we’re just against education higher than our heads, I mean education that we don’t need.”⁶⁸

For conservative Mennonites, another reason for their opposition is the role of faith in determining the age of school leaving. In 1939, Deacon Angus S. Bowman referred to I Timothy, 2:1–2 to explain why secondary schooling was unwanted. “By sending the girls so long to school to become a stenographer, nurse or teacher is in my opinion a different course from the Creator’s intentions.”⁶⁹ Historically, fewer girls than boys attended ELAWS in the time covered by this thesis.⁷⁰

In the 1960s, Douglas Snyder, the director of the Ontario Mennonite Central Committee provided the Ontario Legislature with several reasons why conservative Mennonites were opposed to

67. The Old Order Amish, who are among the most conservative descendants of the 16th-century Anabaptists, object to having their youth enter high school. In recent years parents have gone to jail in support of their stand. They contend that farming and housekeeping do not require higher education and that too much “book learning” is not good for their youth. John A. Hostetler and Thomas J. Meyers, “Old Order Amish” (January 2012) *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Old_Order_Amish&oldid=143686.

68. John A. Hostetler and Gertrude Enders Huntington, *Children in Amish Society: Socialization and Community Education*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 40.

69. Angus S. Bowman in Andrew S. Kinsinger, ed., *Guidelines In Regards to the Old Order Amish or Mennonite Parochial Schools* (Gordonville: Pennsylvania Print Shop, 1989), 77.

70. See Appendix E, Number of students in ELAWS by gender.

public schooling beyond age fourteen.⁷¹ He pointed out that the conservative Mennonites, a rural people, thought that the real education of the children began when they were working on their farms with their parents. He said, “We believe that the early teen years are a valuable time for teaching religion, apprenticeship in agriculture, and responsibility to the brotherhood and family.”⁷²

In 1989, Andrew S. Kinsinger agreed, writing that the value of all education must be assessed in terms of its capacity to prepare the child for life. Compulsory formal education beyond the eighth grade may be necessary when its goal is preparation for life in modern society, but it is not needed in the life of a child who will live in a separated agricultural community, which is the keystone of their faith.⁷³

In their 1989 survey, sociologists Kauffman and Driedger surveyed 3083 progressive Mennonites; one topic was education and modernization.⁷⁴ They asked if higher education had a positive or negative impact on the faith life of Mennonites, knowing that only the most conservative groups (including the Old Order Mennonites and Old Colony Mennonites) have shunned education beyond the elementary level. Kauffman and Driedger were interested in discovering if leaving school at age fourteen truly made a difference in sustaining beliefs. They found that the respondents who had only an elementary education scored highest on the scales measuring beliefs (including Anabaptism), personal morality, and in-group identity.⁷⁵ The conservative Mennonites lived in clearly defined rural areas, surrounded by people who dressed like them, worked in similar jobs, and attended church together.⁷⁶ Members practised endogamy and added to their numbers through births.

71. Fretz, *The Waterloo Mennonites*, 150.

72. Fretz, *The Waterloo Mennonites*, 150.

73. Kinsinger, 35.

74. J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1991), 239.

75. Kauffman and Driedger, 241.

76. Kauffman and Driedger, 270.

The researchers summarized the results from thousands of surveys and concluded that for conservative Mennonites, the emphasis on orthodoxy was their primary concern, and the results of the surveys confirmed that they believed that education only until the end of grade eight was the correct choice in their desire to maintain a lifestyle separate from the world.⁷⁷

In 2002, teacher Amsey Martin of Yatton, Ontario, who taught both Old Order and Markham-Waterloo Mennonite children, explained why conservative Mennonite parents were willing to knowingly break the education laws that required school attendance until the age of sixteen.

Politicians and education officers know that these children leave school two years early, but are currently choosing to ignore this fact. The plain churches find this level of civil disobedience justifiable because they could not, with a free conscience, send their children into the environment of the public high school. The rationale for this thinking includes Bible verse Acts 5:29 which states, “We ought to obey God rather than man.”⁷⁸

The School Consolidation Crisis in Ontario

Educational historian R. D. Gidney recounts that the 1960s were a time of rapid societal change. To provide what was considered to be a better and more extended formal education for all of Ontario’s youth, the government of Ontario theorized that in the name of both social justice and economic advantage, all children should have equal educational opportunities.⁷⁹

The opinion from Ontario’s Ministry of Education was that school consolidation was an essential prerequisite for all the proposed curriculum reforms, which would bring Ontario into the modern age. It was understood that “small elementary schools with modest enrolments lacked the

77. Kauffman and Driedger, 270.

78. Amsey Martin, “Education among the Plain People of Waterloo, Wellington, and Perth Counties.” *Ontario Mennonite History*, Volume XX, Number 1, May 2002, 10. As of 2006, the legal age to leave school in Ontario was eighteen.

79. Gidney, 39.

specialist teachers, the program variety, the options, and the equipment to educate children of different interests and abilities or to prepare young people properly for jobs.”⁸⁰

In 1964, after a provincial election in which it was obvious that due to rapid urbanization rural votes were becoming less important, consolidation of schools was enforced, and Ontario eliminated one of the oldest public institutions in Ontario, the three-member board of trustees of the rural public school section.⁸¹ By the end of the 1960s Ontario had switched from having approximately 3500 administrative units, (1121 school boards had an average daily attendance of thirty or fewer) to approximately 126 school boards.⁸² As well, the 1954 law that made school attendance compulsory between ages six and sixteen would be enforced.⁸³ The conservative Mennonites were appalled.

In 1964, in response to the consolidation legislation, an Old Order minister, Ervin Shantz, began corresponding with William Davis, the Minister of Education for Ontario. Shantz asked if they could compromise on the decision to close the small country schools.⁸⁴ No compromise occurred, and later in the year, when school consolidation became the official policy and the government established township area schools, the local trustees lost their influence over their children’s formal education. As a result, as T. D. Regehr recorded, “almost all the Old Order people refused to send their children to consolidated schools.”⁸⁵ William Davis, the Minister of Education, did agree to one compromise, assuring Mennonite communities that a child of fourteen would still be excused from attendance at school if needed on his parent’s farm.⁸⁶

80. Gidney, 48.

81. Gidney, 48.

82. Gidney, 29.

83. Gidney, 29.

84. Darrell Frey, “The History of Mennonite Parochial Schools in Ontario,” *The Church Correspondent: Markham-Waterloo Mennonite Conference Monthly News*, Vol. L, #5, May 2005, pg. 3.

85. T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed, Volume 2 of Mennonites in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 226.

86. Frey, 3.

The 1960s were critical years for the conservative Mennonites and formal education in Ontario. They had moved from attending public schools to parochial schools, often in the same buildings. They had rejected consolidated schools and certified teachers.

The Manitoba School Act

The conservative Mennonites who came from Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s experienced many setbacks in their search for educational freedom, which hardened their resolve to oppose public schooling. Although Canada had promised these immigrants the right to use German in their schools, the province passed the *Manitoba Public Schools Act* of 1890, which gave the province the authority to control both the language and religion of instruction for all pupils.⁸⁷ The Low Germans chose to keep their children at home rather than expose them to English instruction, secular schools and unknown teachers. After years of dispute between the province and new settlers regarding school attendance, in 1916 the Minister of Education introduced the *Manitoba School Attendance Act*, and announced that the province was building the new Canada, where students would learn to become a new nationality, under the British flag. There would be one common school system, one standard of teacher training, and one language of instruction, English.⁸⁸ Many educational historians have studied the repercussions of this legislation.⁸⁹ The conflict with the government became intense and Mennonite parents once again protested by keeping their children at home, facing fines and even jail sentences.⁹⁰

87. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 91.

88. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920*, 93.

89. See: Howard Adams, *The Education of Canadians 1800–1867: The Roots of Separatism* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1968); Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Joseph Katz, *Education in Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas, David and Charles, 1974); Ronald Manzer, *Public Schools and Political Ideas: Canadian Educational Policy in Historical Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

90. Catherine Falconer Lichty, 30.

The conservative Mennonites could not agree with the Manitoba School Act, and sought a new home that would offer farmland, and a “greater degree of distance from modernizing forces.”⁹¹ Their anger over the loss of the right to school their children as they saw fit led them to leave Canada en masse, even though they had arrived from Russia only fifty years earlier. In their search for educational freedom, between 1922 and 1930, 7,735 conservative Mennonites left Manitoba for Latin America.⁹² Eventually, beginning in the 1950s, the Low German left Mexico for a reverse emigration, back to Canada, this time seeking relief from extreme poverty, rather than for educational reasons. Many of the emigrants moved to south-west Ontario, where agricultural jobs were plentiful.

Conservative Mennonites in Ontario still hold many of the views expressed between the 1910s and the 1990s, a demonstration of the strength of their convictions and the power of tradition.

Teaching Qualifications and the Conservative Mennonite Viewpoint

A shy grade ten student, Lisa, (pseudonym) who barely spoke at the high school, smiled as she showed me around the parochial school where she was the special education teacher. She invited me to watch as she administered a written test to a young girl, an important moment for both of them. If the youngster could complete the booklet with few errors, and in a set time period, she would skip a grade. She was proving to be a fine student because she always finished her workbooks quickly, neatly, and silently.

As the youngster worked away in one room, Lisa turned to helping two grade three students, a sister and brother who were not twins, who had been away for over two months visiting Mexico. While the parochial school did not encourage such long absences, it was a reality, and the special education teacher was expected to help students catch up on all the work they had missed. As they struggled to read simple words in English, Lisa encouraged them and gave them little hints in Low

91. W. L. Morton, “Manitoba Schools and Canadian Nationality 1890–1923,” in *Minorities, Schools and Politics*, ed. D.G. Creighton. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 17.

92. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada: 1920–1940*, 122.

German. When they were successful in reading a string of words, the children grinned and Lisa glowed with pleasure. She had found her calling. Lisa had no formal qualifications; in fact the teacher with the most formal schooling in the school was a student in grade twelve in the ELAWS program. None of that mattered to the little children. They saw a teacher wearing the same style of dress as they did, whose siblings attended their school, and, most important, a teacher who could speak their language.⁹³

Lisa was an unqualified teacher, and not yet a high school graduate, but for the parents who paid tuition for their children to attend a Low German parochial school, she had all the qualifications they expected. She belonged to Old Colony church, spoke Low German and enjoyed the company of the children. Parents' views about who was a qualified teacher in the elementary school context differed, and this was an important element in the discussion of the founding and growth of ELAWS. Most of the parents who allow their teenagers to participate in ELAWS do so because they see the value of an OSSD. Yet, although their children must be taught by provincially qualified teachers to earn a diploma, the same parents are in favour of having their elementary-school-age children taught by unqualified teachers who belong to their church group. The ability of the WRDSB to provide certified teachers was central to the growth of ELAWS, but parents remain conflicted about their choices. Should they follow the religious dictates, and remove their teenagers from school at the age of fourteen, or should they allow them to enter the secular high school, with provincially qualified teachers, which would allow for possible future employment certifications?

The lack of formally qualified teachers in religious schools has been a point of contention between private religious schools and the state throughout Canada. Chad Gaffield wrote in 1987 that religious schools first relinquished total control over formal education when non-denominational schooling became a popular cause in Upper Canada in the 1820s, under the education leader Egerton

93. Personal observation of author.

Ryerson.⁹⁴ The *School Act of 1841* was designed to encourage a uniform school system for the unified Province of Canada.⁹⁵ The *Common School Acts of 1846 and 1850* provided the foundation for a universal, tax-supported elementary school system with qualified teachers.⁹⁶

In Saskatchewan, the conservative Mennonites chose to run their own schools rather than attend public schools, but were unable to supply qualified teachers. Historian William Janzen, who explored the issue of teacher qualifications in religious minority schools, noted that in 1917 the Premier of Saskatchewan visited some of the private Old Colony Mennonite schools. He then wrote to the local bishop that having seen the schools that were conducted in the Mennonite Colonies, he was convinced that they needed improvement.⁹⁷ The premier specifically mentioned:

the teachers you employ in your schools are not in many instances qualified to teach and have no standing insofar as the law is concerned...If you desire to retain your private schools you must have these schools conducted according to the standards of efficiency of the public schools and the teachers employed by you must be recognized by the Department of Education.⁹⁸

The Old Colony parents disagreed with the premier and were determined to operate their schools in their own manner. Dawn S. Bowen wrote in 2010 “Old Colony Mennonites have

94. Chad Gaffield, *Language, Schooling, and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French-Language Controversy in Ontario*. (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987), 7

95. Gaffield, 7.

96. Gaffield, 7.

97. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 105.

98. Janzen, *Limits on Liberty*, 106.

historically responded to the introduction of public education in their communities by moving to areas where there were no public schools.”⁹⁹

Catherine Falconer Lichty’s research found that the guidelines for teachers in the Canadian conservative church mirrored those of the American guidelines for the Mennonite parochial schools. In her 1986 study, she found that the importance of teachers who attended church was paramount. She said that the conservative Mennonites believed that the separation of education from the family and church established an unhealthy distinction between the irreconcilable worlds of the secular and the sacred.¹⁰⁰

Shane Martin’s 2011 study had results that replicated Lichty’s.¹⁰¹ Twenty-five years after Lichty’s work, it was still more important to most conservative Mennonites to have their children taught by adults who reflect their beliefs, than to have state certified teachers who do not necessarily share their values.¹⁰² For some conservative Mennonite parents, there are more dangers in sending their older children away to universities to be trained as teachers than in having their younger children taught by untrained teachers.¹⁰³

A survey of the literature regarding teacher qualifications and training for conservative Mennonite schools indicates a consistent pattern over more than 100 years. In each case of the state trying to control the curriculum and the teachers in the public school system, the conservative

99. Dawn S. Bowen, “Resistance, Acquiescence and Accommodation: the Establishment of Public Schools in an Old Colony,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 84.4 (October 2010): 551.

100. Catherine Falconer Lichty, 44.

101. Shane Martin, 20.

102. Shane Martin, 28.

103. In 1963, *The Blackboard Bulletin* published an editorial regarding the certification of teachers. This was a major concern in the 1960s as the Old Order and conservative Mennonites and Amish were opening their own schools after the time of school consolidation. “We are encouraged by some resolutions made by a group of the most conservative Mennonite ministers. Among other things they state, ‘Many of us feel that it is running too great a risk to expose our young people to the dangers of higher education in preparation to teach school.’ ” “Mennonite Reaction to Teacher Certification Teacher Certification: Giant-Sized Stumbling Block.” Editorial, May 1957. In *The Challenge of the Child* Selections from “*The Blackboard Bulletin 1957–1966*” (Aylmer, Ontario: Pathway Publishing Corporation, 1967). 127.

Mennonites withdrew to their own private schools with their own teachers. This trend has been borne out in the ELAWS program, as will be shown in the epilogue.

Writing in 1996, historian of education Paul Axelrod said, “Historians who are able to paint *both* the broad canvas (social structure) *and* the individual portraits (human experience and responses) will especially advance the historiographical art, as will those scholars who are best able to hear their subjects in their own voices and in their own times.”¹⁰⁴ Through the use of oral history interviews, the next two chapters of this thesis explore the growth and development of one formal educational option available to conservative Mennonites, ELAWS.

104. Paul Axelrod, “Historical Writing and Canadian Education from the 1970s to the 1990s,” *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 38.

Chapter 3: A Secondary School for Low German Mennonites

A recently retired school official pulled up to a hardware store in Elmira at the same time as a large passenger van. As the former school employee got out of her car, she watched a conservative Mennonite mother leave her van, gather up her children and head toward the store. The woman was wearing a mid-calf-length dress of a dark floral print, with lots of pleats in the skirt. She had covered her hair with black lace. The young girls, who were dressed similarly to their mother, had their blonde hair in long ponytails. The small boys wore plaid shirts. As the mother spoke to the younger children in Low German, a teenager, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, tossed her hair back as she laughed and sang along to a song playing on her cell phone. The retiree sighed and turned away. It was a Tuesday afternoon in 2017, none of these children were in school, and she could no longer do anything about the situation. She wished that the Low German teenager was enrolled in the ELAWS program, but the teenager did not appear to be attending high school, despite the attempts of many people in the community to create a high school that would suit her needs.¹⁰⁵

1996–1998: Responding to Truancy

In September 1996, an alternative school program, Elmira Life and Work School (ELAWS), was established for conservative Mennonites in Elmira, Ontario. It did not start for altruistic reasons, but in response to a truancy problem. Across the Waterloo Regional District School Board (WRDSB), many young people had left public elementary schools, but, by their choice and their parents, had not gone on to high school. These students had “fallen through the cracks.”¹⁰⁶ The school, which was the beginning of higher education for a group of students who had never before

105. Rachel Fromm (attendance counsellor) interview by author, Conrad Grebel University College, February 9, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

106. Mike Breton, (teacher), interview by author, Elmira District Secondary School, March 23, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

attended a high school, began out of a concern for the educational needs of Low German teenagers from Mexico.¹⁰⁷ Charlanne Russell, an attendance counsellor for the WRDSB, was one of the first to interact with the Low German, or so-called Mexican Mennonites. One of her roles was to encourage Low German mothers to let their young children come to school.¹⁰⁸ While meeting with the mothers, Russell discovered that teenagers remained at home rather than attending school. When she asked why they were not in school, the families would reply that they had signed a form that allowed their children to leave school at age fourteen.¹⁰⁹ Russell went on to learn about the Three Bridges Public Elementary School (Three Bridges) SALEP form, which sanctioned an automatic release of Mennonite students, at age fourteen, from the public elementary school near the rural village of Hawkesville. SALEP stands for Supervised Alternative Learning for Excused Pupils. The Three Bridges form was originally created for the use of Old Order Mennonites, David Martin Mennonites and Markham-Waterloo children.¹¹⁰ The SALEP form allowed a student to be legally compliant, as *section 21.1.1 of the Education Act* in Ontario reads, “A person shall be considered to be attending school when he or she is participating in approved equivalent learning.”¹¹¹ The Three Bridges form specifically refers to exemption from school only for farm work and housekeeping, and learning from the student’s own parents.¹¹²

107. “In 1997 there were at least 25,000 people in Ontario who came from the Mennonite colonies in Mexico. They arrived over several decades. Their grandparents had moved to Mexico from Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the 1920s...But life in Mexico had become very difficult. The prospects in Ontario were better. Here, they could quickly get work as families on cucumber and tomato fields. Eventually, many would take jobs in factories and pursue other occupations.”

Janzen, *Build Up One Another*, 5.

108. Charlanne Russell, (attendance counsellor), interview by author, Grand River Collegiate Institute, February 28, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

109. In a 1972 U.S.A. Supreme Court case, Chief Justice Burger stated that for the Amish, the employment of children under parental guidance and on the family farm from age fourteen to age sixteen is an ancient tradition. Kinsinger, 12.

110. David Martin Mennonites are an ultraconservative group of Old Order Mennonites. Peter Hoover, “David Martin Mennonites” (July 2010). *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=David_Martin_Mennonites_\(Ontario,_Canada\)&oldid=114116](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=David_Martin_Mennonites_(Ontario,_Canada)&oldid=114116).

111. Phil Sauder, *Rural Education Services Project: Progress Report and Recommendations*, December 1, 2011, 8.

112. See Appendix A. Three Bridges SALEP Form.

Russell questioned the validity of this form when applied to the Low Germans, who were recent immigrants from Mexico. They did not own farms and were transient agricultural workers. They did not have the structure of a family farming business and she did not consider the signing of the form to be a valid explanation for not attending high school. In the late 1990s, Russell asked, “Why weren’t these teenagers in school? What were they learning at home?”¹¹³

Russell wondered if these students were being exempted for religious reasons. She asked, “Was it because they were Mennonite that they could avoid school?” and if so, “what were the ramifications at the school board level with other religious groups?”¹¹⁴

Art Wombwell, a guidance counsellor at Elmira District Secondary School (EDSS), agreed with Russell that this use of the Three Bridges SALEP form was untenable. Wombwell said, “We had to lie to fill in the SALEP forms for the fourteen year olds.”¹¹⁵ Wombwell continued, “We knew that the boys couldn’t work on a farm of their own, and the girls couldn’t learn from their mothers, who were often out of the home, working themselves.”¹¹⁶

While they knew that other conservative Mennonite groups could participate in the informal apprenticeship system that was available to them, the attendance counsellors believed that the Low German teenagers had nowhere to go in their early teens. Although these young teenagers did not have jobs to go to, they still wanted to leave school at age fourteen, like the other conservative Mennonites. This was a problem, because without the requisite farms or related work settings and unless there was a school program for them to attend, they were considered truant. This was believed by some to be more of a technical concern than a practical one. For example, the attendance counsellor, Rachel Fromm [pseud.], felt that the Ministry of Education did not understand that there

113. Russell, interview.

114. Russell, interview.

115. Art Wombwell (guidance counsellor), interview by author, Elmira District Secondary School, March 1, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

116. Wombwell, interview.

were different groups of Mennonites.¹¹⁷ She was sure that no government body would want to re-examine the contentious issue of early school leaving or actively pursue and prosecute a religious minority who did not abide to the strict letter of the *Education Act*.

Wombwell and the EDSS administration realized that, “we had to create something for the Mennonites for whom the Three Bridges agreement wasn’t a good fit. The Old Colony teenagers were the front liners.”¹¹⁸ As a result, in 1994–1995 many initiatives were instigated to understand and address the reasons for non-attendance by the Low German.¹¹⁹

As one response, the first *Mennonites from Mexico Forum* was held on June 19, 1995, at which educators representing eight school boards in Southwestern Ontario discussed their experiences in serving the educational needs of the Low German community.¹²⁰ One outcome was a general consensus that school boards needed to exhibit creativity around developing policies consistent with the *Education Act*, with sensitivity to the needs of the Low German students.¹²¹ In an effort to understand the Low German attitude toward formal education in the local setting, a guideline was created for the WRDSB to use as it contemplated the “escalating concern of non-attendance at school of older Mennonite children from Mexico (primarily 14- and 15-year-olds).”¹²²

In response to the initiatives, in the spring of 1996, five Low German students enrolled in EDSS and a program for conservative Mennonites began. (The program was unofficially called the

117. Fromm, interview.

118. Wombwell, interview.

119. Waterloo County School Board, meeting minutes, the Mennonites from Mexico Forum, December 6, 1994. 1. Records with the author.

120. Much of the resistance to extending the time the students spent in formal education was understandable in light of the educational context familiar to Low German families. In the Low German colonies in Mexico, a child started school at age seven, and girls typically finished school at age thirteen, and, in some instances, at age twelve. The boys finished at fourteen. The school year in total was about six months. Anna Wall, “The Old Colony and Education,” from the Blog: Mennopolitan. <http://www.mennopolitan.com/search/label/Growingpercentage20upperpercentage20Oldpercentage20Colonypercentage20Mennonite>.

121. Meeting minutes, Mennonites from Mexico, 5.

122. Janice Oulette, *Mennonites from Mexico: A Cultural Profile and Report of Related Information for Policy Formulation on Mennonites from Mexico in the Waterloo County Board of Education* (Kitchener: Waterloo County Board of Education, 1995), 3.

Mennonite program and/or the Old Colony Mennonite program.) There was an assumption that there would be up to ten students the following year. The students were coming from outside of the Region of Waterloo (they lived in the Perth catchment area) and were attending school irregularly, which made it hard to plan lessons. Based on the prediction of increased numbers, it was suggested, for the first time, that a part-time English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher be hired for the 1996–1997 school year to serve the Low German population.¹²³ In order to retain the students from Perth County and the funding that was available for the students, it was considered prudent to demonstrate that EDSS was offering a program not available in Perth.¹²⁴ As a result, EDSS created a program that would offer ESL and an introduction to health and safety legislation and monitoring of the students.¹²⁵ It was proposed to run five days a week, and that the Low German would study ESL for two or four periods a day. The students would also integrate into regular EDSS classes, such as Sewing and Physical Education for the rest of the day.¹²⁶ The reality of the nascent program was quite different.

While Russell was looking for young students and their families, Mike Breton, a teacher, was at EDSS waiting to meet with the teenagers that Russell found. Breton was sent to EDSS knowing that he had “the freedom to do whatever he needed to do to make it a pleasant enough experience that the Low German teenagers would come back another day.”¹²⁷ The principal of EDSS allowed Breton to engage in pure teaching with no curriculum and no expectation of credit accumulation. With the approval of the WRDSB, Wombwell, Russell and Breton began to change the program to meet the preferences of the Low German students.

123. Russell, meeting notes, April 17, 1996. This and subsequent notes used with permission of Russell.

124. Russell, meeting notes, April 1, 1996.

125. Russell, meeting notes, June 1996.

126. Russell, meeting notes, September 3, 1996.

127. Breton, interview.

One of the first requirements to satisfy the wishes of the Low German parents was to choose a setting separate from the regular school students. Breton laughed as he described their first classroom: “We met in a small, disused engine room at the back corner of the school. It was small and dark, but it had a fire exit.”¹²⁸ Students could approach the room from a driveway behind the school and, as a result, were able to avoid students attending the regular school. Eventually, the students and Breton agreed that they needed air and light, so they changed rooms, which required the students to walk in the main school hallways. Then the program was moved to a portable classroom where the students could be separate. A shifting of location was a recurring theme of ELAWS as staff struggled to address the need for viable programming with appropriate physical space while still being removed from EDSS itself.

Breton said that to EDSS staff members, “The program must have looked very odd. There was no timetable, the students came and went, and not every day.”¹²⁹ Breton enjoyed the opportunity to seek creative solutions to the difficult problem of truancy.

Russell spoke of facing ethical dilemmas in carrying out her duties related to eradicating truancy. Many of the Mennonite families she met were living in great poverty, in deplorable living situations,¹³⁰ often residing in crumbling old farmhouses. Low German parents often had great difficulty finding suitable accommodation because they had large families. They were working in the shops of other groups of Mennonites, making hockey sticks, for example, and were renting sub-standard housing from their employers.¹³¹ And, in some instances, they could only rent as long as

128. Breton, interview.

129. Breton, interview.

130. Janzen, *Build Up One Another*, 30.

131. Royden Loewen recorded another disheartening form of discrimination that some members of the Low German community experienced on their return to Canada. “Perhaps the most difficult aspect of settling in Ontario was the feeling of discrimination arising from their low status as Mexico-origin immigrants. Heinrich Banman recalled his feeling when he discovered that the ‘Canadian Mennonites looked down on Mennonites from Mexico,’ and ‘when I worked in the factory... they would say “you Mexican” to me.’ Royden Loewen, *Village Among Nations: Canadian Mennonites in a Transnational World 1916–2006*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 166.

they continued to work for the employer. Consequently, if a Low German family wanted to change jobs or move to a better house, they needed to substantially increase their income. This usually meant parents were forced to rely on their children to provide additional income, and thus the children could not attend school.¹³²

In one case Russell became upset when she saw trucks belonging to a large corporation at a local woodworking shop. Russell questioned whether the company owners knew that “kids who should be in school are making those products.”¹³³ She asked, “Do they turn a blind eye for the cheap labour; do they purposely ignore it?”¹³⁴ At one shop Russell met a fourteen-year-old foreman doing dangerous work with no health and safety training. When she intervened, the child was fired. She said, “I caused trouble without meaning to.”¹³⁵ She considered writing a letter to the corporation about the child labour situation, but then worried that it might backfire. “What if the press found out that we knew the kids were working and we didn’t enforce attendance?”¹³⁶ She did not send the letter.

Russell continually questioned her actions, motives and job, in one case saying “They had such awful poverty; they were so marginal, they really did need the kids to work.”¹³⁷ She felt strongly that there would be no future for these teenagers in Canada if they had no farm to inherit, and were illiterate, and yet she recognized that the families were so poor that they required the contributions of their teenagers. She was in the home of one family as the mother prepared lunch for the thirteen

<https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/winter-2015/village-among-nations-low-german-migrants-and-idea>

132. Low German teenagers normally give their wages to their parents. Different families have different rates of contributions. In 2018, a Low German boy informed me that he had given 85 percent of his earnings to his parents since he started grade ten and co-op. Now that he was graduating from grade twelve he could keep half his wage, mainly because he now had a car to maintain. After a discussion about his aptitude to study for a trade, he did say that it would be hard to pay for college with the little money he had left, but he was not open to learning about bursaries and grants from the college.

133. Russell, interview.

134. Russell, interview.

135. Russell, interview.

136. Russell, interview.

137. Russell, interview.

children who were at home that day.¹³⁸ The mother told Russell that it was, “a hard life, but not as hard as being in Mexico.”¹³⁹ At that point in the interview Russell asked rhetorically, “How do I understand how hard it is for those families, how do I be non-judgemental? I am a middle-class woman.”¹⁴⁰

The challenges Russell experienced may have been amplified because she was a woman. She spoke of a particularly harrowing incident, saying, “I was not popular.”¹⁴¹ Russell met a girl in a home, and the girl was interested in coming to EDSS and working with Breton on paper-based, Independent Learning Centre (ILC) booklets, which were correspondence courses from the Ontario Ministry of Education.¹⁴² After Russell left the girl’s home, the father of the girl phoned Russell and yelled, “I will slaughter you like a pig if you talk to my family again.”¹⁴³ Eventually the father called Russell back, crying, and Russell did not pursue legal action.

The bias against women workers is reflected in conservative traditions and understandings. In speculating on the degree of resistance she experienced, Russell referenced a memo published by the Mennonite Central Committee in 1992 that declared that “both men and women accept the dominance of the male in their culture.” The memo continued, “A father finds it difficult to accept advice from anyone as to how he should behave with his family. This is especially true when the advice is given by a young female worker.”¹⁴⁴

138. One set of boys from a Low German Mennonite family delighted in telling me that they were just a small family of eleven. Their parents both came from families of over twenty children; they were not sure of the exact numbers. They loved seeing the reactions of the teachers when they shared this information.

139. Russell, interview.

140. Russell, interview.

141. Russell, interview.

142. Independent Learning Centre (ILC) courses adhere to **Ontario Ministry of Education** requirements and cover all pathways to graduation. Courses are offered in English or French, through an **independent distance education** model.

143. Russell, interview and Wayne Ziegel (teacher), interview by author, Ziegel residence, Elmira, November 4, 2016, transcript, University of Waterloo.

144. Mennonite Central Committee *Guidelines Toward Understanding the Low-German Speaking Community*, (handout), November, 1992.

In spite of the challenges, Russell persisted in trying to enrol students in ELAWS. She considered using one family as a test case, and taking them to court to force attendance, but decided “that would have sunk the program.”¹⁴⁵ She attempted to visit one family, along with the principal of Wellesley Public School, so that he could explain the law, but when they arrived the family had disappeared and the house was empty. Usually, Russell sent letters to the homes stating that the children must be in school. She noted that the power was in the threat – the families did not want to get in trouble with the law, and the younger children would begin to attend.¹⁴⁶

Despite encouragement by the school administration and Breton’s efforts, the number of Low German students attending EDSS was very low. Wombwell recalls that there were only six to eight students in the ELAWS in 1996, noting that the number was fluctuating greatly.¹⁴⁷ Breton experienced challenges with teaching because several students could not read or write in English or German.¹⁴⁸ Although Breton had few Low German Mennonite students, his attempts to fulfill his teaching roles each day (teaching both English and a behavioural class in the regular school) meant he could not focus on developing the program. Calls for a more consistent approach to staffing and supporting the Low German program became another theme characterizing the program. The lack of a Low-German-speaking staff member continues to hamper ELAWS. Several attempts were made to remedy the situation, but stringent collective agreements in the WRDSB, established collaboratively with the teachers’ federation, meant that only provincially qualified teachers could apply for jobs.¹⁴⁹ There were few Low German university graduates at the time of this study.

145. Russell, interview.

146. Russell, interview.

147. *Mennonites from Mexico Forum*, memo, Elm Hurst Inn, Ingersoll, December 6, 1995.

148. In 1984 Art Enns volunteered to teach a group of six Low German boys in Aylmer after the local high school principal asked for assistance. The students were “almost illiterate...but they have been faithful in attendance...” Ontario Mennonite Immigrants Advisory Committee (OMIAC), April 13, 1985 in Janzen, “Build Up One Another,” 13.

149. Cameron Brubacher’s 2016 study of Low German alternative programs found that having a Low-German-speaking teacher on staff could make the difference between a child attending a public school or not. The *Education Act, 247/12*, which restricts hiring to those with the most seniority, has made it difficult for alternative programs to hire the

Fortunately for Russell and EDSS, some teenagers did want to attend school, and some parents allowed them to go school if they could be spared at home. Parents came to see, often through employers, that an education could lead to a better job and future for their children. One employer at a wood shop wanted a boy to be able to understand fractions and angles. The family saw that if he could do math, he could get a better job.¹⁵⁰ Another family asked the school if their child would be trained to keep books for their business.¹⁵¹ The family indicated that if the school could provide specific practical skills, including the ability to read and write in English, then sending their child would be worthwhile.¹⁵²

Achieving literacy was possible through the program, although, as Wombwell said, “There was no thought at all of a diploma; we just tried to offer skills.”¹⁵³ In fact, Breton believed that if the emphasis had been on high school graduation, these first students would not have attended. He said that graduation was too far away, too much work and too much a part of the world for these reserved people who avoided mixing in society.¹⁵⁴

As a precursor to the future development of the co-op program at ELAWS, in his second year at EDSS and on his own initiative, Breton began a practice that continued for years. Breton realized that Russell was finding students, but most were not ready to enter the school building. As a result, Breton began to visit the homes of the students, in an ever-enlarging area that included Arthur and Mount Forest, towns more than forty kilometres from Elmira. He would visit the youth at their homes

teacher with the most suitable qualifications, such as language and cultural backgrounds. Cameron Brubacher, “Low German Mennonite Experiences in Alternative Education Programs in Southwestern Ontario,” (unpublished paper, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2016): 70.

https://www.google.ca/search?q=cameron+brubacher+low+german&rlz=1C1GGRV_enCA751CA751&oq=cameron+brubacher&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j69i59.7226j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

150. Russell, interview.

151. Russell, interview.

152. Breton, interview.

153. Wombwell, interview.

154. Breton, interview.

during the day to work on literacy skills and regularly visited one family in Drayton during the evening.

Breton soon found that some of the older students came to the school portable at night, because they had been working in shops during the day, after hearing about the program through word of mouth in the local community.¹⁵⁵ Breton found the students really wanted to learn, but it was hard to gauge a success rate. He believed that perhaps only one or two credits in total were earned through the completion of ILC courses.¹⁵⁶

By the end of the second year, all stakeholders recognized that changes were needed if the program was to survive. In 1997 the new principal at EDSS agreed not to SALEP conservative Mennonite students. Instead, he would allow students to be absent for seasonal labour.¹⁵⁷ This was an important distinction. If the students were not released, they would be tied to EDSS, and would have to be monitored regularly and would have to attend school. Russell thought that a full-time community worker should be assigned to ELAWS to monitor the students, but that did not happen.

In 1998, Breton was transferred to another high school, but just before his departure from EDSS, the Mennonite program was highlighted in in the *Record Midweek* newspaper dated June 24, 1998. The reporter noted that the program began when a “few students showed up who clearly couldn’t be integrated into regular classes. Some lack formal education and their academic skills are minimal....The teacher behind the Elmira program is Mike Breton, who makes it clear the individualized program is optional”¹⁵⁸ The reporter goes on to record that, “It was only a few months ago that the Mexican Mennonite community leaders, who live in Tillsonburg, endorsed the program. Cornelius Reimer, a community elder...said there has been fear that a mainstream education may

155. Wombwell, interview.

156. Breton, interview.

157. Russell, meeting note, September 10, 1997.

158. Liz Monteiro, “School helps Mexican Mennonites fit in,” *Record Midweek*, June 24, 1998.

cause the children ‘to take hold of other beliefs and lose the Church.’ But Reimer said the students must learn English to be successful.”¹⁵⁹ Student Jake Hiebert was quoted as saying, “Most Mexican Mennonites think bad stuff happens at school, like sexual relationships...but it’s stuff that helps us in our lives.”¹⁶⁰ Breton expressed sadness at having to leave the fledgling program, after working so hard to develop trust within the community, noting that despite the recent public recognition, “there was no celebration about keeping this going.”¹⁶¹

Following Breton’s departure, a preliminary meeting regarding an educational program for Low German teenagers was held at the St. Jacob’s Family Support Centre on March 30, 1999, and on May 18 of the same year a community meeting was held at EDSS. In attendance at the EDSS meeting were Russell, the high school principal, the head of Special Education for the WRDSB, and the leaders of the Low German community in the local area and Aylmer,¹⁶² as well as twenty-seven parents. During the meeting there was a good discussion and an agreement that the community members would “get back” to the educators. The parents asked about a segregated setting where there would be limited exposure to television, limited homework, monitored computer use, and the students would be exempt from receiving sexual education.¹⁶³ The school board representatives were asked to leave the meeting after the discussion so that the parents could speak freely among themselves.

Despite the encouraging start, no teacher replaced Breton between 1998 and 2000. It is not clear why no one was assigned to continue the program, particularly as it appeared to be growing after the positive meeting, acceptance by the church leadership and active promotion by social workers.

159. Monteiro, June 24, 1998.

160. Monteiro, June 24, 1998.

161. Breton, interview.

162. Russell notes, March 30, 1999, May 18, 1999. Used with permission of Russell.

163. Russell notes. March 30, 1999, May 18, 1999. Used with permission of Russell.

In 2003 Russell transferred to another school district. She commented, “I worked so hard with that community, I was so naïve.”¹⁶⁴ She had tried to impose her liberal Western mindset on the “problem” of the Low German Mennonites and their rejection of education. Russell realized that she had taken on too much when she tried to override the wishes of an entire religious and cultural group.¹⁶⁵

Historian Royden Loewen, writing about the transnational history of the Low German people, argues that people in roles such as Russell’s could benefit from seeing the Low German as “villagers among the nations, not adherents of the culture they find themselves in.”¹⁶⁶ He explained that front-line workers like Russell would experience less burnout and frustration if they could see the Low German as they see themselves.¹⁶⁷ They do not see themselves as a problem, but as a people of God who travel through the world, remaining true to their beliefs and customs. For more than four hundred years they have retained their identity in spite of persecutions and migrations.¹⁶⁸ The well-meaning social workers and school officials who encounter the Low German on their temporal travels could try to see that they do not need to “fix” the people: they need to try to learn from them, and to listen to what matters in the Low German world.¹⁶⁹

The Low German did not want to conform to Ontario school laws. They did not want to be drawn into modern society, although some could see that Ontario schools had good things to offer. They wanted to be left to themselves, and for the next two years they were able to do as they liked.

With no teacher, the program withered to only one student and the ELAWS program essentially ended. Nevertheless, the desire to offer an educational experience was not gone.¹⁷⁰

164. Russell, interview.

165. Russell, interview.

166. Loewen, “A Village Among the Nations,” *Grebel Review*.

167. Loewen, “A Village Among the Nations”. *Grebel Review*.

168. Wiebe, *They Seek a Country*, 11.

169. Loewen, “A Village Among the Nations.” *Grebel Review*.

170. By 2011, only two Low German students were in the regular stream of studies at EDSS.

Wombwell, the only consistent staff member in the alternative program from 1996 to 2012 asked, “How can we keep this going? How do we move from infancy to a viable program?”¹⁷¹

From those tentative first steps, with a combination of the pushing of a school system to recognize the extraordinary concerns and circumstances of a cultural and religious group, and the pulling of that same group into access to employment through literacy training, the ELAWS program emerged.

2000–2003: ELAWS Early Years

The effort to resurrect the program in 2000 developed from earlier school-based discussions that acknowledged a need to involve more education stakeholders, with a variety of roles, and community members. Engagement of the education stakeholders focused on dialogue about the profile of the Low German community, the education system’s role in meeting increasingly diverse needs, the potential for higher student enrolment in a period of decline, and the commitment of resources that would ensure some likelihood of success.¹⁷²

Following these discussions, a teacher named Wayne Ziegel, who had been the head of the co-op department at EDSS, was assigned to ELAWS. When he retired in 2000, the principal asked Ziegel to remain at the school on a part-time basis and promised that he would find money to re-start the Mennonite program. In 2000–2001, after the program was renewed, there were about twelve to fifteen students enrolled.¹⁷³

Ziegel had contacts in the business community, so he decided to offer a modified co-op option to the new students, arranging for some of the boys to be employed in skilled trades, an opportunity

171. Wombwell, interview.

172. Mark Harper, (superintendent of Learning Services, WRDSB), interview by author, Harper residence, Waterloo, July 9, 2018, transcript, University of Waterloo.

173. Wombwell, interview.

not available outside of the school setting.¹⁷⁴ As word of employment opportunities for students spread, other Mennonite groups came to hear about the program. Providing access to desirable employment was an attractive benefit, and became a defining characteristic of the program.

Ziegel, who was called “a great recruiter,” and an “initiator,” was exceptionally good at selling formal education to a reluctant audience.¹⁷⁵ Ziegel, now known as the SALEP co-ordinator, made his way through Woolwich and Wellesley townships in the Region of Waterloo, and even into Perth and Dufferin counties, dropping into farms and machine shops and introducing himself to people. One student recalled that he got along well with the parents; he said, “He came to our farm and had “lots of time to talk.”¹⁷⁶

These excursions did not initially increase the number of students, but Ziegel felt that encouragement and co-operation was more effective than threats about attendance and the law. The low numbers of students in the program prompted some discussion at the school board, through the SALEP committee about “tossing in the troubled kids,” to increase enrolment in the fledgling ELAWS program. This idea was dismissed.¹⁷⁷ This was one of a number of important decisions arising from the expanded dialogue in the development of ELAWS. While increased numbers of students would have generated more staff and program options, the ELAWS staff were aware of the suspicion and reservations of Mennonite parents toward public education and the associated risks of mixing their children with “outsider students” who were viewed as not law-abiding. This would likely have ended the ELAWS program for all conservative Mennonites.

174. Ziegel, interview

175. Wombwell, interview; 175. John McKinney, (teacher), Interview by author, Elmira District Secondary School. April 19, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

176. Steve Weber (student), Phone interview by author, May 4, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

177. Some members of the SALEP committee thought that since there were so few students in the ELAWS program, they could add “troubled” students to it. The majority of SALEP students in the WRDSB were not conservative Mennonites. The usual use of SALEP was to remove students from school who were incapable of being successful in a structured school setting. Wombwell, interview.

Part of the expanded dialogue around ELAWS involved senior administrators at the school board, particularly the school superintendent, who participated in a number of discussions relating to the Low German program. One topic was the allocation of funding to establish the program and assess if it could exist as a viable, sustainable program.

Superintendent of Learning Services, Mark Harper, had responsibilities in working with strategic innovations and board-designated specialized programs from 2007 to 2013.¹⁷⁸ This included often serving as a liaison in support of the work with conservative Mennonite students at EDSS. Harper, alluding to the nuances of per-pupil funding provided by the province of Ontario in his work later in the evolution of the program, described how revenue generation and utilization was not always as straightforward as it might appear.

Money generated by student enrolment is allocated to a school to address many aspects of educational programming for all students. A fledgling program with inconsistent and unpredictable numbers of students often runs up against demands for teachers and resources from more established courses and programming within a school. Without special attention and additional resources set aside to shepherd a program through the initial stages, most specialized programs struggle to get established due to a variety of competing demands.¹⁷⁹

By adding conservative Mennonite students in Elmira, the school board would receive financial benefit, but the complication was that grants to meet student needs could not be slated for the exclusive use of a specific student or group.

178. Harper, interview.

179. Harper, interview.

In addition, the money was allocated based on projected enrolment, which had to be verified as actually occurring after certain “count” dates. Often, particularly with a population where attendance is traditionally sporadic, the funding may fail to materialize because the students do not actually attend or are no longer enrolled in a program at the required date.¹⁸⁰ As a result:

the perception that there was a substantial, dedicated amount of funding to directly support the Mennonite program was somewhat misleading. Funding allocated to the school by the school board that was derived from the grants for student needs was able to be used, with the support of the superintendent and through the discretion of the Principal, to support the program beyond what the grants for the actual number of students in a specific program or course may have generated.¹⁸¹

Consequently, when Ziegel asked the principal for money to purchase ILC curriculum for use in the emerging ELAWS program, it was granted.

Dialogue about the program for Low German students included community service providers who were considered as one source of potential programming. In 2002, Ziegel asked his principal if the Low German and David Martin Mennonite students who were on SALEP and not attending school could be required to attend a Workplace Safety course offered by a community group, as a means to engage the students and increase exposure to the school.¹⁸² There was no follow-up to this initiative, and Ziegel continued to focus on other strategies to encourage engagement with ELAWS.

Previously, Russell had involved a school trustee, an elected official from the WRDSB, in a visit to a machine shop where a young student was working. Russell had hoped that the trustee, who

180. Harper, interview.

181. Harper, interview.

182. Wayne Ziegel, e-mail to principal, February 27, 2002. Used with permission of Ziegel.

was part of a committee required to sign the SALEP form, might see that workplace safety was a concern. In addition, the trustee might also understand that the student was not leaving school to work on his own farm, which was the requirement of the Three Bridges agreement.¹⁸³ The attendance counsellor felt that the trustees were supportive of ELAWS and she said, “They listened.”¹⁸⁴ The trustees on the SALEP committee agreed that EDSS should keep the Low German students on the school register despite erratic attendance, in light of their unique circumstances. By having the students remain on the register, funds were generated from the provincial government that were used to support specialized programs and the Low German students who benefited from them.¹⁸⁵

Even with access to resources and growing support from a variety of stakeholders, ELAWS faced multi-faceted challenges in developing and sustaining a viable program. As ELAWS slowly grew it required more resources. By 2003 the number of students justified the allocation of one and a half teachers, but this was not popular with some in the regular school, who viewed the allocation of teaching staff to ELAWS as detracting from the teachers available for the regular school population. As Wombwell noted, one of the weaknesses of the program was that the small number of students in class, for shortened and irregular periods of time, meant that classes in EDSS had to be larger to compensate for the Mennonite program.¹⁸⁶

John McKinney, the EDSS teacher assigned as a part-time teacher to support the program, arrived in September of 2003 to find between twenty-five and thirty students sitting in the classroom. McKinney had to cope with these higher than previous numbers while providing a number of services. His solution was to divide the older students into groups, with each one attending school one

183. Russell, interview.

184. Fromm, interview.

185. Fromm, interview.

186. Wombwell, interview.

day per week, either Monday or Tuesday. The students could choose the day they wanted.¹⁸⁷

McKinney's attempt to solve a simple problem of numbers became another one of the characteristic features of ELAWS, a one-day-a-week program of formal schooling for grade eleven and twelve students, combined with four days a week of co-op.

McKinney recounted having to monitor dozens of different courses at one time, both helping the students to complete their work, marking the courses, and doing co-op monitoring.¹⁸⁸ McKinney was assisting students in grades ten through twelve, and he had a senior student from EDSS paid to help with the marking. Ziegel was teaching grade nine, in a teacher-directed classroom model, as well as doing co-op monitoring in the afternoons. He had two paid markers as helpers.¹⁸⁹

Despite modest success, there was still considerable suspicion and resistance to public education among Low German parents. While attempts were made to create a welcoming school program, most of the parents were still not interested in secular schooling. As Abe Wall, a Vice-Principal with the Grand Erie public school board who had a Low German Mennonite background, explained at a Low German Service Providers conference, "The Low German came from a history of being told, for five hundred years, that education was a bad thing."¹⁹⁰

2004–2012: Consolidation and Sustainability

In 2004, Rachel Fromm (pseudonym) joined Ziegel. Fromm became an attendance counsellor at EDSS after working as a social worker for the Low German at Woolwich Community Services in Elmira. As a German immigrant who had arrived in Canada as a child, and as a Mennonite Brethren

187. McKinney, interview.

188. McKinney, interview.

189. McKinney, interview.

190. Abe Wall, Low German Service Providers Networking and Resourcing Day, Elora, Ontario, November 27, 2014.

churchgoer, Fromm could relate to the families.¹⁹¹ Many of the Low German families in the Elmira area already knew her as their social worker.¹⁹²

When discussing her interactions with the Low German population, Fromm noted that “relationship was the key.”¹⁹³ Those relationships allowed Fromm to meet some of the fathers of potential students, which she believed was critical. Fromm was not afraid to let the fathers know that, “this is what education in Ontario looks like,” and that they were legally obliged to ensure that their children received a specific education.¹⁹⁴

Fromm had a strong personal belief that children had the right to be educated. She felt there should be an attendance counsellor/social worker attached to just the Low German students, especially so there would be a clear connection between school and home, and they wouldn’t get “lost” at the end of grade eight.¹⁹⁵ The same advice was shared at a full-day conference for Low German Service Providers, with the suggestion that one teacher be assigned to one family over a number of years to create long-term relationships.¹⁹⁶ This idea had not been pursued when Russell suggested it, and it was rejected again when Fromm advanced it.

If ELAWS was to survive, and this was an agreed-on and preferential goal among all of the WRDSB stakeholders, then more changes were needed to increase student numbers and solidify the program. At the school level, based on previous growth, there was commitment to creating a sustainable program for Low German students. On this topic, Wombwell said, “The evolution of this

191. The Brethren in Christ evolved originally from a break-away Mennonite group in Basel, Switzerland. They believed in non-resistance, prayer veiling for women, and non-conformity in fashion. By 2013 there were 279 congregations in North America, and a shared relationship in organizing the Mennonite Central Committee.

Nelson Hofstetter and E. Morris Sider, “Brethren in Christ Church” Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Brethren_in_Christ_Church&oldid=13381.

192. Rachel Fromm [*pseud.*], (attendance counsellor), interview by author, Conrad Grebel University College, February 9, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

193. Fromm, interview.

194. Fromm, interview.

195. Fromm, interview.

196. Low German Service Providers Networking Day. June 14, 2004,

program was always driven by the questions, ‘What does this culture want from us? What does it take for them to buy in a little more? How can we change things so that the students are more inclined to come?’ and, importantly, from the school’s viewpoint, ‘How do we make it right for them, without breaking the rules?’¹⁹⁷ Echoing Fromm’s comment that “relationships are the key,”¹⁹⁸ Ziegel said, “The whole thing is, they have to trust you.”¹⁹⁹

In attempting to answer some of their key questions, school stakeholders used community input, combined with their personal strengths and insights. Some of the questions posed by Wombwell had been addressed by introducing co-op to ELAWS. Adding and building on this employment component satisfied the community’s need for job training and wages. It allowed for a schedule that limited the hours of traditional schooling while meeting the school board’s requirement for a timetable for each student. The introduction of co-op led to the confirmation of the program name, the Elmira Life and Work School.

An article in *The Record* newspaper, dated May 15, 2006, spoke about the “Elmira Living and Work” project. The reporter, Luisa D’Amato, noted that, “Little by little, Elmira’s high school has successfully reached out to traditional Mennonite families to persuade them to send their children here.”²⁰⁰ Fromm had previously suggested the “Elmira Life and Work School” as an appropriate name, and it was adopted.

With an identifiable name reflective of the program and an emphasis on the value of working through the school, rather than against the school, parents were more willing to accept that their teenagers should attend a public secondary school. Introducing co-op made it possible for the

197. Wombwell, interview.

198. Fromm, interview.

199. Ziegel, interview.

200. Luisa D’Amato, “Respect and Compromises; Specialized program at Elmira high school blends public education with Mennonite traditions,” *The Waterloo Region Record*, May 15, 2006.

guidance department to “craft a program where you could actually earn a diploma.”²⁰¹ Fromm saw that a schedule combining school and work was a healthy compromise between the expectations of the public education system and those of the Low German parents.²⁰² The families were more aware of labour laws the longer they were in Ontario, and recognized that their children could not work in shops until they were fifteen or at construction sites until they were sixteen. By combining school with co-op, they were obeying the law and increasing their skill and literacy training. This acceptance was crucial in consolidating and building a viable ELAWS program.

One possible factor in the program growth may have been because it was free for students to attend, as advertised in the *Elmira Independent* newspaper. Fundamentalist homeschooling families began to express interest in having their children attend.²⁰³ The persistence of the staff in working to better understand and adapt to the families who expressed interest was important in helping consolidate a responsive and sustainable ELAWS program.

What distinguished ELAWS from many other alternative programs was that it survived, consolidated around recognizable features, evolved to better meet the needs of the initial target audience and expanded to include other groups of students who typically were not enrolled in secondary public education. The key features included a substantial co-op component, scheduling that included a short period of classes combined with full days of work, the opportunity to earn a wage, flexible educational programming geared to the preferences of the families, insightful staff who were sensitive to the culture and values of the community, persistence and hard work, and collaboration at several levels leading to compromise and mutually agreeable understandings. The result was a new

201. Wombwell, interview.

202. Fromm, interview.

203. ELAWS advertisement for September 2007 registration, *Elmira Independent*, May 2007.

model of public secondary schooling that addressed the needs and interests of a student group not previously served.

Chapter 4: Compromising to Design a Program that Satisfies Stakeholders

On a grey November afternoon in 2009, the Elmira Life and Word School (ELAWS) conducted a social experiment. The teachers were nervous. Would any of the thirty-one girls in the program show up for ice hockey for girls, which was about to begin for the first time? Because they would have to stay in Elmira after school hours, they would miss their school buses and might be late for their chores.

Low Germans did not traditionally play ice hockey. Would any of those five girls come to the arena? What about the five Markham-Waterloo girls? Once they were baptized and joined the church, they were expected to avoid using public facilities such as arenas that would tie them to the world. Would the two Amish girls from Wellesley be willing to drive home after such a long day? The sixteen Midwest Fellowship girls already had their own church ice hockey league; perhaps another ice time would be too much. Would the three girls from the Hesson Christian Fellowship church or the two former home-schooled girls want to play?

As the time approached to start the game, not much noise was coming from the change room. Suddenly the door opened and out streamed the girls. There were about twelve altogether; not many, but enough to have two teams. A Low German girl emerged in borrowed skates. She had never tried ice hockey before, but she was willing to learn, she said, as she pulled herself along the boards and chose to be the goalie, where she thought she would not have to move too much. All of the girls showed up with hockey helmets, and although everyone had their hair covered, for the first time the teacher saw the girls' long hair hanging down in ponytails. One Markham-Waterloo girl in grade nine, and an Amish student helped each other to stand up as they pulled their hockey jerseys over their dresses.

Everyone threw their hockey sticks in the centre of the ice and the teacher tossed them out in two random piles to form the teams. There were no cheers or board banging, but everyone was active and smiling. The experiment was a success.²⁰⁴ Just as in the hockey game, in spite of their differing backgrounds, over time the students in ELAWS learned to work together to accomplish their goal of earning a high school diploma.

2003–2006: The Integration of Three Religious and Cultural Groups

In the 2003–2004 school year, after considering all of his interactions with people on rural back roads, Ziegel was ready to act on his belief that other conservative Mennonites, not just the Low German, could benefit from the ELAWS program. ELAWS staff had found that some of the Low German students were flourishing in the ELAWS program. Typically, these students had attended local public schools, their parents were supportive of formal education, and the families were committed to regular attendance of their child at school. Given the levels of success with some Low German students and families, ELAWS evolved by widening its focus to include the Markham-Waterloo and the Midwest Fellowship. ELAWS tried to discern how it might address the interests, preferences and potential needs of all three groups.

At the same time as Ziegel was trying to recruit new students, some Markham-Waterloo parents wanted to offer high school credits to their children, in some sort of a private school. One of the Markham-Waterloo leaders in this effort was dairy farmer and father of six, Glen Lichty. He became interested after his oldest son had tried a correspondence course on his own, and Glen and his wife were not able to help him with the questions.²⁰⁵ As a result Glen Lichty, and others, contemplated starting a high school of their own and Glen Lichty, who was the secretary/treasurer of his church, had got as far as speaking to the deacon about this idea. The deacon said that the

204. This anecdote is based on the personal observation of the author.

205. Glen Lichty (parent), interview by author, Glen Lichty residence, Alma, March 31, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

Markham would never have a high school; the money could not come from the church so it would have to be self-funded.

However, the deacon did not say that the teenagers were not allowed to go to school. When the deacon asked who might attend this new school, Glen Lichty said, “just the boys.” He was flabbergasted when the deacon responded, “Why not the girls? I think the girls need just as much education as the boys. They are trying to run million-dollar farms with a grade eight education.” This endorsement precipitated more thinking and action among the Markham-Waterloo community.

2004: The Countryside Christian School Meeting

One of Ziegel’s co-op contacts was Tim Martin, an employer, an involved parent at Countryside Christian School (Countryside) and a member of the Midwest Fellowship. Countryside, a parochial school in Hawkesville, offered classes, at the time, up to grade ten. Ziegel began to talk about ELAWS with Tim Martin and other representatives of the Midwest Fellowship.

An evening meeting was arranged in the gym at Countryside. Although none of the interviewees could recall the precise date, they remembered that it was held in 2004, and there was nice weather. The meeting was highly unusual: a private conservative Mennonite school was inviting staff members from Elmira District Secondary School (EDSS), a public secondary school, to speak to parents about a high school education.

This meeting was profoundly important to the growth and evolution of the ELAWS program. For the first time, parents from a variety of conservative groups, including the Low German, met together to hear about secondary schooling. It must be remembered that few of the parents or grandparents had gone past grade eight in their own schooling²⁰⁶ and secondary schooling had been

206. In a 1960 U.S. census, 40 percent of Mennonites stopped their education at the end of Grade eight, while 22 percent of the population had less than a grade eight education. Paul Bender, “Mennonite Secondary and Higher Education: A Report of the Study conducted for the Study Commission on Mennonite Secondary and Higher Education,” (December 1964): 25.

actively discouraged in the conservative Mennonite community. This first attempt by public educators from ELAWS to open the door to higher education for young conservative Mennonites beyond the Low German was the occasion of many firsts in secondary schooling history. Allowing the meeting to be held in the private Christian school was indicative of an unprecedented spirit of co-operation between the church and the state.

This meeting had the potential for ramifications far beyond Countryside and ELAWS. If the new model for an educational program within a public secondary school that ELAWS was presenting was successful, perhaps other religious and cultural minority groups could benefit. If three conservative Mennonite groups could work together with a public education system to create a secondary school program, after decades of avoiding it whenever schooling beyond age fourteen was suggested, then there was the potential for other religious and cultural minorities to work collaboratively and productively within the public education sphere.

During this time, the possibility of a public secondary education was presented in other ways to the same conservative Mennonites. Wombwell, who had already paid an important visit to the Old Colony Church in Drayton in the late 1990s, where he spoke to the congregation during the lunch hour after the service, was allowed to make a presentation at Pathfinder Christian School in Wallenstein. It was surprising that Wombwell was permitted to visit, because the school served the Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario, a group which believed strongly in the need to be separate from the world.²⁰⁷

Wombwell also visited grade eight classes at Three Bridges, Wellesley, and Floradale public schools, all part of the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB), where there were a significant number of students from conservative Mennonite groups. He spoke to the grade eight students at Center Peel Public School in the neighbouring Upper Grand District School Board. In

207. Draper, 298.

each case he spoke only to conservative Mennonite children, and let them know about the ELAWS program at EDSS.

As momentum built for a secondary program within the Markham-Waterloo and Midwest Fellowship, the educational leaders supporting ELAWS recognized that to be successful, the program would have to accommodate the needs, interests and preferences of a much wider range of parents and students. Just as had been done in the early years, when the co-op component was added, the program needed to be revisited and reimagined. ELAWS needed to become “all things to all people” in the conservative Mennonite world.²⁰⁸

The revisiting began by reviewing the needs of the Low German families. One obvious issue was that there had been limited parental involvement in ELAWS. Traditionally, interactions between parents and staff members had occurred in homes, and there was no clear spokesperson within the local community that regularly communicated the perspectives or aspirations of parents. The ELAWS staff sought to remedy this situation, so that they would know what the Low German parents wanted for their children’s formal education.

The Midwest Fellowship members valued formal education, but expressed their belief that schooling should be obtained in specified settings. Draper noted that they regarded too much interaction with the world as risky for young people, which is why most members sent their children to private schools.²⁰⁹

Within the ELAWS catchment area, Countryside and other Midwest Fellowship parochial schools offered both an elementary and high school curriculum to grade ten. Many Midwest Fellowship parents paid tuition to send their children to those schools. However, some Midwest

208. McKinney interview.

209. Draper, 303.

Fellowship families, particularly those who were part of the Crystal View Mennonite church congregation, at the time of this study, sent their children to local public elementary schools.²¹⁰

Tim Martin, who had helped to arrange the 2004 meeting at Countryside, recognized that there was a void in the education of the Midwest Mennonites and a need for further formal education for young people.²¹¹ The male members of the Midwest Fellowship, who had a variety of occupations, did not hesitate to seek professional instruction, especially in the trades. They recognized that they needed an OSSD to enter some trades.²¹² They further recognized that girls could use their formal education, particularly the skills that they developed in math and accounting, to help run farms and businesses and assist on committees at church, while still being mothers at home.²¹³ The fathers knew that farming was a high level, competitive business. As a result, both farming and non-farming families expressed an interest in high school.

In his interview, Tim Martin emphasized how changes in Mennonite thinking had led them to become more open to public education in Waterloo County than they were in the 1960s. He recounted that while the conservative Mennonites had retreated from public education at the time of school consolidations, some conservative Mennonites were now more open to listening to the school board. He explained that earlier generation had been more guarded and were mainly farmers. He insisted that the current generation of parents had more diversified experiences and knew that their children needed further formalized education.²¹⁴ Tim Martin also said that the parents of today's teenagers

210. Leonard Freeman, "Crystal View Mennonite Church (Floradale, Ontario, Canada)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. February 2015.

[http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Crystal_View_Mennonite_Church_\(Floradale,_Ontario,_Canada\)&oldid=153881](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Crystal_View_Mennonite_Church_(Floradale,_Ontario,_Canada)&oldid=153881)

211. Tim Martin, (parent). Interview by author, Country Lane Builders, Hawkesville, April 7, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

212. Draper, 303.

213. Tim Martin, interview.

214. In 1966, one objection to high school was the type of trade courses that offered. "They offer graduates diplomas in motor mechanics, electronics, photography, business and finance, you name it—they teach it—everything but agriculture." *Milverson Sun*, April 18, 1966, in Fretz, *The Waterloo Mennonites*, 150. By the early 2000s, the Mennonite parents wanted all of these practical courses.

often had to hire people to help them with tasks, and they wished that their own children could do the jobs. He said that he would have liked to attend school beyond grade eight. The growing recognition in the community of the benefits of secondary education and the willingness to explore opportunities available through the public system were important components in the evolution of ELAWS.

The main feature that attracted the Midwest Fellowship to ELAWS was co-op. The balance of work and formal education was appealing, and addressed the need for the “stewardship of time.”²¹⁵ Tim Martin explained that conservative Mennonites understood that time is a gift from God, not to be wasted. He gave an example of a family with a thirteen-year-old boy, who remained at home after grade eight despite the fact that his family did not own a farm. Tim Martin said the parents did not want idleness and so perhaps they would consider sending the boy to high school.²¹⁶ Similar to the Low German parents, it was important to the Midwest Fellowship that receiving a formal education and working went together. Parents did not want their children to waste time at school, explaining that this would be the case if they were not going to use their formal education for pragmatic purposes.

The ELAWS staff took many cultural factors into consideration as the program evolved. At the meeting at Countryside, ELAWS staff heard from Markham-Waterloo parents that, just like the Midwest Fellowship and Low German parents, they were opposed to television, changing clothing for Physical Education classes, and any type of sexual health course.²¹⁷ Wombwell knew that the students did not have to change clothing, as religious exemptions were permitted for it by the Ministry of Education, but he summarized the overall considerations when he asked rhetorically, “Within ethical (academic) boundaries, can we offer what they want? Can we be flexible enough to

215. Tim Martin, interview.

216. Tim Martin, interview.

217. The Board and its staff were committed to eliminating all types of discrimination as outlined in *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* and the Ontario Ministry of Education Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119. https://www.dsbn.org/uploadedFiles/DSBN_Policy/Human_Resources/Policy-E-11.pdf

give them what they need? After all, the school was an authentic credit granting institution. It was not a private school, making its own rules.”²¹⁸

Glen Lichty was at the meeting at Countryside in 2004. During his interview, Glen Lichty said that the Markham-Waterloo were on the verge of hiring a qualified teacher to supervise and mark ILC courses when they heard about the meeting at Countryside. He provided insight on what some people in the Markham-Waterloo church community in 2003–2004 thought about secondary education. He referred to the men who contemplated founding a private school. Glen Lichty explained that he personally had a problem with the tradition of children leaving school at age fourteen. He knew that his eldest son, who was about to finish grade eight in June of 2005, did not appear to want to be a dairy farmer. He knew that with a grade eight education, the only option available for employment would be as a general labourer.²¹⁹ At the same time, if his son did join him in farming, it would be difficult to keep the farm operational without enhanced computer and business skills as they had a complex, multi-million-dollar, business to run. Glen Lichty was sure that his son needed more formal education.

The Countryside meeting provided Glen Lichty and other interested men with information on the type of formal education that the WRDSB could offer. Glen Lichty remembered thinking, “This is exactly what we need. It was an impressive meeting. There were about one hundred people in the gym, some farmers and some not. I was amazed!”²²⁰

Glen Lichty contacted another Markham-Waterloo parent, a man who had gone to high school in the public education system. After some discussion they asked each other, “Is this what we

218. Wombwell, interview.

219. *The Blackboard Bulletin* had an article critical of higher education. “The world today has gone overboard for education...It has been said that even the position of floor sweeper in many factories requires a high school diploma.” David Wagler, letter to the editor *The Blackboard Bulletin* (January 1963): 65.

220. Glen Lichty, interview.

want?”²²¹ We don’t really know what we want, but we do need someone to help us get ready for trade school.²²² We don’t need all these farmers anymore. We need plumbers, electricians, gas fitters.”²²³ Glen Lichty spoke to other parents who had attended the meeting. They appeared to be interested at the time, but later they expressed their uncertainty about sending their children to town to complete further formal education. One man said to Glen Lichty, “Let’s just watch it for a year.” Glen Lichty responded, “There won’t be anything to watch if the parents don’t sign up.”²²⁴ Glen Lichty was so taken with the presentation, and how it seemed to dovetail with the Markham-Waterloo needs that he asked the teachers, “How can I help?”²²⁵ The Markham-Waterloo parents gave up on the idea of a private school after they heard about the ELAWS idea. The deacon who had approved the idea of a self-funded school, with no church support, allowed the parents to enrol their children in ELAWS.

The meeting at Countryside required re-examination of the ELAWS program and a return to some of the questions that emerged when the initial program was implemented. It forced staff to again look at the ‘big picture’ of this evolving program. Wombwell asked, “Could we maintain the flexibility to deliver what the parents wanted while under the scrutiny of the school board?”²²⁶ It prompted staff to clarify and assert their roles as educators on behalf of a public system. Wombwell affirmed that to continue the staff would have to be able to tell parents, “you can’t tell us what to do, but we will listen to you.”²²⁷ And in a more conciliatory tone, Wombwell suggested telling the parents, “Let me take your hand and show you what we can do together.”²²⁸

221. Glen Lichty, interview.

222. Draper summarized the Markham-Waterloo approach to higher learning: “the Markham-Waterloo Mennonites are not opposed to continued learning and reading for information or correspondence courses... short courses for technical training are also acceptable....” Draper, 277.

223. Glen Lichty, interview.

224. Glen Lichty, interview.

225. Glen Lichty, interview.

226. Wombwell, interview.

227. Wombwell, interview.

228. Wombwell, interview.

2006: Student Attendance and School Leaving Age

Another component in the evolution of ELAWS was a growing recognition in the WRDSB of the need to reduce dropout rates and promote success for all students. Although conservative Mennonite students were not considered to be dropouts in the typical fashion, the board recognized that their lack of participation was reflected in lower credit accumulation and graduation rates system wide. All of these were increasingly being used as indicators of system effectiveness and excellence.²²⁹

When *The Record*, a newspaper distributed in the Region of Waterloo, published a story about the Mennonite program on May 15, 2006, the reporter realized that the readers would not understand why the conservative Mennonite students had not been attending school in the same way as others in the region. D'Amato wrote, "Elmira school principal Gary Ayre said that the program isn't really designed to reduce the dropout rate. In fact, traditional Mennonite students, many of whom leave public school on their 14th birthday, weren't considered dropouts."²³⁰

This article is informative because both the school principal and the superintendent for the WRDSB explained why it was appropriate for students not to be in school after their fourteenth birthday. Ziegel explained that the ELAWS program attempted to integrate the conservative Mennonites into high school slowly. He said that the staff acted with "compassion and concern and a genuine interest in the well-being of the individual student and the community at large."²³¹

In 2006, Ministry of Education requirements about the school leaving age changed again, making it more difficult for the ELAWS staff to entice conservative Mennonites to enter high school." That year *Bill 52, Education Amendment Act (Learning to Age 18)* raised the school leaving

229. Harper, interview.

230. D'Amato, Luisa, "Respect and Compromises; Specialized Program at Elmira High School Blends Public Education with Mennonite traditions." *The Waterloo Region Record* May 15, 2006.

231. D'Amato, "Respect and Compromises."

age to eighteen or graduation. The negative reaction from conservative Mennonite groups to this change, combined with their traditional attitudes, meant that ELAWS staff walked a fragile and challenging path in discussing secondary education with conservative Mennonite families.

2003–2009: Formalizing Segregated Schooling

The meeting at Countryside Christian School in 2004 led to a coalescing of groups and educational approaches within the evolving ELAWS program. The discussion precipitated strong sentiment among parents that the incoming ELAWS students needed to be segregated from the regular school. Although the Low German students had participated in the ELAWS program within the school building for a number of years, there was a strong consensus that as more conservative Mennonite groups joined the program, being farther away from the main building would be better. Perhaps anticipating this direction, the grade nine students had been meeting in a portable dedicated to ELAWS, beginning in 2003. The students in grades ten to twelve had been congregated in a main computer room in the school, which was shared with the guidance department. There was merit in this location for educational reasons.

McKinney thought this was a good setting because the students were able to access the ILC correspondence courses on the computers. In addition, the students were close to Mr. Wombwell's office so they could readily talk with him about a job or personal interests when selecting courses to complete.²³² Despite the advantages of the location, it was not a popular choice with parents.

In an effort to create a welcoming environment, accommodating parental preference took precedent. A decision, supported by school and board administration, resulted in ELAWS being moved away from the EDSS campus to a nearby community centre. Tim Martin recalled that he was

232. McKinney, interview.

amazed that individuals could influence the school board, and that the WRDSB was willing to adapt to the needs of the cultural group and actually pay rent to make them feel welcome.²³³

Lions Hall was leased for the ELAWS program on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays commencing in September 2005. Lions Hall was only 650 metres from EDSS, so the staff could go back and forth as needed and the students could use the gym at the main school for lunch hour volleyball games.

Fromm observed that because of the move off-site, there were few opportunities for relationship building or interaction between the conservative Mennonite students in the ELAWS program and other EDSS students. This helped alleviate one of the fears of the Low German parents that their children would be exposed to illegal drugs at the high school. Fromm noted that “if they hadn’t been off-site, the parents wouldn’t have let them come to school. There is no doubt in my mind.”²³⁴ The Markham-Waterloo had the same opinion; Glen Lichty said, “Having ELAWS at Lions Hall helped. Separation was most important.”²³⁵

D’Amato, acknowledged the fears of the parents in her 2006 *Record* article. She said:

It’s not just the obvious perils of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll in schools that worried the Mennonite families about sending their children to a public high school. It’s other things too, which seem perfectly normal to mainstream Canadians: a boy talking about buying a car, a girl nearby in a bright red sweater, a conversation about going away to another city to attend university.²³⁶

233. Tim Martin, interview.

234. Fromm, interview.

235. Glen Lichty, interview.

236. D’Amato, “Respect and Compromises.”

While the move had some disadvantages, it is clear that this decision was an important step in the evolution of the program. Wombwell explained that moving it to Lions Hall honoured the wishes of the parents for segregation and helped to formalize the program. He stated that providing the ELAWS program with a separate location made it feel as if conservative Mennonite students had their own school.²³⁷

At the WRDSB the senior administration debated about creating the segregated environment with a separate location because there were budgetary implications and the Lions Hall facility did not comply in all areas with typical secondary education standards. There were concerns about the scope of additional special accommodations that might be demanded by other religious or cultural groups.²³⁸ They also considered whether outsiders might see a segregated program as a move to ghettoize the students to prevent them from making independent life decisions of their own, outside the influence of their church groups.

The move to segregation seemed to run contrary to the prevailing attitudes in society and the public school system about embracing diversity, promoting inclusion and bringing people of different backgrounds together. This debate flowed back and forth at the school board level as senior administrators considered the implications, the precedents, the use of language and the contrasting perspectives that emerged.²³⁹

Despite the debate and concerns, pragmatism carried the day. A large and growing group of secondary-aged students were now receiving secondary school instruction from certified teachers and benefiting from programming that contributed to their personal well-being and longer-term success. The program complied with legislated requirements under the *Education Act*, largely with the support of family and their community. The provision of a unique education program for conservative

237. Wombwell, interview.

238. Harper, interview.

239. Harper, interview.

Mennonites was supported based on the notion that the unique circumstances and potential for more positive, helpful outcomes outweighed the negatives.²⁴⁰

In fact, any concerns from outside the conservative Mennonite community about the segregation of identifiable groups of students from one another must have been voiced surreptitiously, if at all. To illustrate this, a glossy brochure that was widely distributed on behalf of the program in 2006 to encourage families to enrol their children stated:

The program has enjoyed segregated growth each and every year since it began. Every year we continue to welcome families who have not participated in public education or who seek a more segregated environment than a public high school...As of September 2006 the program is housed at the Elmira Lions Hall, down the street from the high school. This setting provides an additional level of segregation for the participants.²⁴¹

Some parents still thought there was not enough space between the school and Lions Hall, and there was some discussion of moving out of Elmira, with its dangerous temptations of stores and restaurants.²⁴² The possibility of having a satellite school at Crosshill Mennonite church was considered and there were talks with Three Bridges about using a few rooms there as a high school. Nothing came of these initiatives.

Another key feature of the evolving ELAWS program was the focus on school as a place of learning and skill acquisition that was separate from religious instruction. This was in keeping with the requirements of the *Education Act* and the public education system, but also helped to reinforce

240. Harper, interview.

241. Waterloo Region District School Board, *Elmira Life and Work School: Working Together to Build Great Futures. Engaged Learners, Engaged Communities*, brochure, 2006.

242. Elaine Good [pseud.], (student), interview by author, Good residence, April 27, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

the dominance of the family and church as the purveyor of religious teaching and understanding. This positioned ELAWS as a relatively objective, non-judgemental and uninvolved third party, where students and their families with a conservative Mennonite background, and sometimes varying and disparate beliefs, could co-exist in a learning environment in relative harmony.

The explicit absence of regular, overt religious references might seem counterintuitive and something that could detract from support by participating families. However, this did not seem to be the case. McKinney, a teacher from 2003–2006, had no strong religious beliefs. Wombwell noted that the students really liked and respected McKinney, even if he was not a Christian. McKinney was true to the academics; he was an excellent listener and he was not judgemental. Wombwell said that in the end it was probably good for the students to come to know and like a teacher who had no religious persuasion.²⁴³

This feature of ELAWS contrasts with related historiography that revealed that all of the conservative Mennonite groups favoured church-run elementary schools with teachers from their own religious group. In ELAWS the teachers were employees of the WRDSB. The conservative Mennonite parents were not only allowing their children to enter schooling beyond age fourteen, they were allowing them to meet men and women who likely had nothing to do with their Mennonite church and may not have been Christian. This must have been a consideration for the parents, and yet none of the interviewees mentioned it as a concern or a preferred accommodation. This experience offers more evidence that ELAWS evolved through a collaborative effort of adaptation and compromise, in this case, where parents from a religious minority were flexible enough to overlook dogma and work with a public education system, enabling their children to benefit while still honouring their beliefs.

243. Wombwell, email to author, March 2, 2017.

Once established at Lions Hall, the program required consolidation and structure. Once ELAWS moved to Lions Hall and the students no longer had access to the library and computer rooms to complete their school work, they had to exhibit more independence.

The flexibility and compromise that was an important feature of the evolving ELAWS program was evident in the use of the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) courses. For example, when teachers were assisting the students with the material in their ILC courses the students would come across sections in that were in opposition to their beliefs. In such instances, teaching staff used strategies to minimize dissonance or conflict with the prevailing religious perspective. One teacher recalled getting a note from home asking that a student be excused from completing a chapter on reproduction in a biology course. He responded by doing some “curriculum customization,” and ripped the chapter out of all the ILC courses before other parents could see it.²⁴⁴

Tim Martin was appreciative of this flexibility. “The program was a perfect match for the community. The teachers said they could work around reservations, and the more restrictive parents saw their willingness to be adaptable.”²⁴⁵ When asked if he could recall a case of the teachers showing flexibility, Glen Lichty said that he could answer in two words: “Harry Potter.” Some parents assumed that they would have no say about the curriculum and that they could not speak up if they were displeased about a book related to magic. Instead, they were impressed when told that the book was not required. There were other options available.²⁴⁶

Flexibility or selective adaptation was sometimes used when significant conflict between religious and public education sensibilities was present. These instances were not always inevitable or predictable. The use of computers is a case in point. Although the use of technology is associated

244. Phil Sauder (teacher), interview by author, Conrad Grebel University College, February 27, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

245. Tim Martin, interview.

246. Glen Lichty, interview.

with the modern world and could have been seen negative by some, the teachers did not hear any complaints.

Jeff Martin, a teacher who joined ELAWS in 2006, remarked that the students were very respectful of the equipment, and that most of the Markham-Waterloo students had no previous experience with computers.²⁴⁷ Glen Lichty was not surprised about the lack of computer knowledge. He knew that many of the parents were not computer literate, but they wanted their children to be trained to use technology properly.²⁴⁸

Jacob Wall, a parent council member and a representative of the Low German, was the father of three children in the ELAWS program. He wished that he had been given the chance to get more schooling. Wall said that he liked learning, and he wanted his children to have more opportunities than he did, especially to learn more about computers. He owned a furniture-making company with many customers and many different pieces of furniture. Wall described how difficult it was to run a business with his limited schooling. He was glad that ELAWS had a computer course each year because his daughter Susie was able to organize a lot of his business affairs, thanks to what she learned at school.²⁴⁹

Some people, however, including Rachel Fromm and a Special Education teacher at Linwood Public School, viewed ELAWS as having a negative influence on the Low German community. They suggested that ELAWS might perpetuate cycles of poverty, apathy or marginalization by denying some students access to a full high school education and, by extension, the opportunity and possibility it may afford.²⁵⁰ Both of these women thought that the Low German students should be expected to

247. Jeff Martin (teacher), interview by author, Elmira District Secondary School, March 20, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

248. Glen Lichty, interview.

249. Jacob Wall (parent), interview by author, Jacob's Mennonite Furniture, Petersburg, April 25, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

250. Jacob Wall told the author in 2009 that despite what the teacher at Linwood P. S. said to him, that if he could not send his daughter to ELAWS, he would not send her to high school at all.

attend the regular high school. They felt that if there was an “easier” alternative, the families would choose it. However, over several years, they agreed that ELAWS was effective in providing a secondary school education to students who refused to enter EDSS.²⁵¹

Somewhat in contrast to the perspective that school may enable self-limiting or defeating practices, ELAWS is viewed by many as organic in nature with a focus on building a helpful educational experience geared to the needs and aspirations of the conservative Mennonite population.

A historian, Janzen, alludes to some of this thinking when writing about Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario programs in the Aylmer area. He refers to the importance of the growth in understanding, the creation of trust, and the development of relationships involved in the conceptualization and development of programming, as much as the importance of the programming that results.²⁵² Following Janzen’s line of thought, the significance of the ELAWS program is that, through experience gleaned through interactions involving relationship and trust building with this conservative Mennonite community, it effectively addresses the educational preferences of conservative Mennonites and focuses less on the educational and career expectations or aspirations of others from outside the conservative Mennonite community, including many in the public school system.

Although conservative Mennonites were the primary audience and participants in the program, ELAWS was not explicitly identified as a program exclusively for them. Early in the ELAWS evolution, the concept of the program being segregated to a single religious group was rejected as being exclusionary and contrary to the goals of public education. There was no reference to religion or that a student had to be a conservative Mennonite. Rather, as the school board became more engaged in the discussion about the program, it attempted to explicitly position ELAWS as a

251. Fromm, interview.

252. Janzen, *Build Up One Another*, 2.

program supporting students with a particular profile. The profile included a reluctance to attend school past the age of fourteen, a disposition toward the world of work, a compelling desire to gain cooperative education experience while minimizing the time in traditional classroom settings, a need for foundational literacy and numeracy skills, career aspirations that followed family tradition and a desire to be insulated from the mainstream school and society.

In theory, any student with a profile similar to that served by ELAWS could gain entry into the program. While ELAWS has evolved into a program that includes the participation of students from backgrounds other than conservative Mennonite, the majority are conservative Mennonite.

2003–2006: Aspects of Integration in a Segregated Setting

The segregation of students in ELAWS from the broader school community resulted in all ELAWS students sharing Lions Hall, computers and other learning resources, and instructional and co-instructional activities. Thus, the conservative Mennonite groups within the ELAWS program needed to work harmoniously and in an integrated manner. Integration within ELAWS presented itself as a challenge to the staff, students and community, in how different groups of conservative Mennonite students could work and co-exist together.

One of the challenges not understood or fully appreciated by ELAWS staff at that time, particularly with the prospect of additional conservative Mennonite groups participating in the program, was the desire of most of the newly arrived Low German to remain apart from other Mennonite groups. They were afraid of being assimilated into the wider Mennonite population. The divergent experiences among conservative Mennonite groups required ELAWS staff to be diligent in responding to personal and community circumstances when offering educational programming. Knowing that the Low German community had emigrated several times to avoid compulsory

schooling, ELAWS leaders understood they must tread carefully to avoid a full-scale retreat from the program.²⁵³

The Markham-Waterloo and Midwest Fellowship students, who were increasingly entering ELAWS, had cultural and economic backgrounds and traditions that differed from the Low German. The Markham-Waterloo and the Midwest Fellowship had been in the Elmira area for several generations. Entering secondary school was a significant step from their communities into the modern world, but for most of the students, secondary school was not an academic challenge. This created a dilemma for the staff in the ELAWS program. How could they meet the wildly varying educational needs of the students in a uniform setting? How could they encourage the students to intermingle, or should they?²⁵⁴ The initial approach was to continue using the ILC courses, allowing students to choose the type of courses and subject area they wanted. Often students were encouraged to work together based upon the courses they were completing.

Former student Elaine Good [pseud.] was the first female, and the only Midwest Fellowship girl to enter grade nine following the meeting at Countryside.²⁵⁵ She offers some insight into the educational setting and conditions in which the integration of the students in ELAWS evolved. Good was in a large class of sixteen boys, which she found “daunting,” but she and her family were “forward thinking” and she was very glad that she had the opportunity to attend high school.²⁵⁶ Good was a graduate of the public school system at Three Bridges and had always enjoyed school, but her parents would not have given her permission to join the main student body at EDSS. Other girls from

253. As early as 1874, some of the Old Colony children were attending public schools in Manitoba. It was the conservative element of the Kanadier that rejected public schooling and left the country. Epp and Friesen, 7.

254. In the same period that ELAWS was trying to build a public school program for a conservative Mennonite population, a progressive Mennonite high school, Menno Simons Christian School in Calgary, AB, took the unusual step in 2005 of approaching the public school division to ask about a partnership, because the school, with 25 percent Mennonite students was struggling. While ELAWS was trying to mix groups of conservative Mennonites, Menno Simons Christian School did not have enough Mennonites in the student body. Karin Fehderau, *Canadian Mennonite: Waterloo* Vol. 15, Issue 11, (May 30, 2011): 4–7.

255. Good, interview.

256. Good, interview.

her church, Crystal View Mennonite, were going to the regular high school and becoming nurses or certified teachers, but it was not deemed a choice for her by her family. Good's family was happy about the part-time aspect of ELAWS because they wanted to instill a good work ethic in their children.²⁵⁷ Like several other parents, her father wished he had a high school diploma. He wanted to change jobs for health reasons, but had few choices with a grade eight education. Her mother, who ran a bakery business and had to teach herself some basic computer applications, wanted Good to learn computer skills.

Good excelled and persisted in completing the ILC courses. Her parents helped her by giving her at least one day a week to complete the school work, finding time around her employment at a shoe store, a restaurant, their own bakery and the Elmira market. By grade twelve, Good was a teacher herself, working three days a week in Special Education at an Old Order Mennonite parochial school.

When Good graduated from high school, with only one mark below ninety percent after four years, she thought that only about half of the students she had started with were graduating.²⁵⁸ Good observed that it was too difficult for most of the male students to work full-time in construction or farming and complete their school work independently.²⁵⁹ These boys were a living example of the tension between their family and cultural expectations and the rigours of academia. If they completed their school work, they fell behind at their workplace—the place of true value in their community. For some of the boys who began in ELAWS in grade nine, the role of a formal education in unlocking a door to future possibilities seemed vague and unwanted. There are statistics to show that students who first entered ELAWS at an older age and grade were more successful in graduating.

257. Good, interview.

258. In fact, only 31 percent of Good's classmates who earned all of their credits in ILC courses graduated in four years.

259. Good, interview.

They must have made a conscious decision to come to school after the usual grade nine entry point, and therefore they were more committed to completing the school work alone or at ELAWS one day a week.²⁶⁰ The contrast between Good's circumstances, disposition and experience with school and those of her classmates, particularly some of the boys, highlights the challenges in creating an engaging, personalized and integrated learning environment that considered the circumstances and preferences of all.

As noted, the integration of students into ELAWS included gender. Some parents would make a blanket statement that, "girls don't need an education."²⁶¹ Glen Lichty, reflecting on the Markham-Waterloo perspective, noted that there was limited support for girls to attend school. To illustrate the attitude that school was a distraction from real work for girls, he said that a father asked him, "What's wrong with maid work?"²⁶² "But a few visionary parents let them go, and the girls went on to sell the program themselves."²⁶³ Direct invitations encouraging girls to attend, cultivating welcoming environments and creating programming that met their interests were important in efforts to integrate all students into ELAWS.²⁶⁴

Integrating the girls required that they be given similar opportunities to the boys to explore possibilities for employment beyond their traditional roles as homemakers once they married. The work outside of the home that was offered to girls provided a sense of fulfillment, a chance to keep busy, and realistically, in recognition of the high cost of housing in the Elmira area, an opportunity to earn needed wages.²⁶⁵

260. There was a 54 percent graduation rate, using ILC courses only, for students entering Grades 10, 11, 12.

261. Tim Martin, interview.

262. Glen Lichty, interview.

263. Tim Martin, interview.

264. In 2006, 35 percent (17/61) of the students in ELAWS were female.

265. Personal observation of author.

The preparation at ELAWS led several of the girls to work as teachers during and after high school, and a few even worked after marriage. The parochial schools they worked at had clear gender divisions, but the girls were allowed responsibility for their own classroom.

The social aspect of ELAWS provided opportunities for interaction, integration and relationship building. However, balancing the opportunity for social interaction with a focus on learning and skill development was a significant consideration in sustaining a credible and sought-after program, at least from a parental perspective.

In some instances, the perception of too much social interaction became a concern. For example, Glen Lichty heard from parents who were choosing not to send their children to school because of the social interactions, including mingling at lunch hour during sports. Glen Lichty tried to squelch rumours, and reminded the parents that the sports were optional. One man said that he had seen a group of Markham-Waterloo girls “Hanging around downtown” at lunchtime and if all they were going to do was “hang out at a variety store,” then what was the point of school?²⁶⁶

When Glen Lichty looked into the situation, he determined that only two girls were in town for an errand, but, as he concluded, “people will see what they want to see.”²⁶⁷ Tim Martin did not remember any problems with interactions among different groups, although some parents in the Midwest Fellowship thought that there was a lot more intermingling than was actually happening.²⁶⁸ At school the students sat with teenagers from all of the conservative Mennonite groups, at least during class time.²⁶⁹ Wombwell remembered that the students would sit together in class, when their parents would not have.²⁷⁰

266. Glen Lichty, interview.

267. Glen Lichty, interview.

268. Tim Martin, interview.

269. One thing that many of the students had in common was their ability to speak English and Pennsylvania German. According to the president of the German Pennsylvania Association, a European organization, up to 10,000 people belonging to the conservative Mennonites of the Markham- Waterloo conference, and the Midwest Fellowship churches, all of whom were represented at ELAWS, spoke the Pennsylvania German dialect. The students all chose to

Interestingly, with the parents pushing for separation from the regular school, McKinney tried to honour their wishes, and set up a different time for the lunch hour, so that the Mennonites would not mingle with the students at EDSS.²⁷¹ But the conservative Mennonite teenagers wanted the same lunch hour as the regular school and they wanted to go to the cafeteria.²⁷² Wombwell and Ziegel did not remember any tensions between the ELAWS students and the regular students at the high school.²⁷³

Glen Lichty, whose opinion might not have been reflective of other parents in his community, thought that mixing of groups was a good thing.²⁷⁴ In his experience, school worked best when there were a variety of groups. He believed that when only one group was schooled together there was more mocking and bullying. He attributed this to increased peer pressure when everyone was the same. Within one group, each family might have slightly different things which they allowed, but the children could not adapt to the differences.²⁷⁵ Lichty expressed exasperation with some parents who complained about the mixing between the students at ELAWS, noting that there was very little intermarriage arising out of ELAWS, and the few boys who did leave the Markham-Waterloo group after meeting and consequently marrying Midwest Fellowship girls might have been leaving the Markham-Waterloo church regardless of whether they attended secondary school.²⁷⁶ Mrs. Snyder,

speak English at school, but their German language skill did allowed the principal to waive the requirement of a compulsory French credit required for graduation, as most of the students had a second language.

Frank Kressler, "Number of dialect speakers growing again: Up to 40,000 people who speak or understand Pennsylvania Deutsch in Ontario," *Waterloo Region Record*, August 24, 2017, A9.

270. Wombwell, interview.

271. McKinney, interview.

272. McKinney, interview.

273. Wombwell, interview.

274. Glen Lichty interview.

275. Glen Lichty, interview.

276. Glen Lichty, interview.

another Markham-Waterloo parent, was not concerned about the mixing at school. As she said, “I figure they go into town, and some children will get into trouble no matter where they are.”²⁷⁷

Despite efforts to integrate the different Mennonite groups, interactions within ELAWS were limited by the structure of the program. With the short academic week, students had little time to get to know each other. While the boys might sit together when working on an assignment, and the girls might mingle around the computers, the two sexes rarely mixed. Each church group went its own way at lunchtime. Each cultural group demonstrated a strong desire to remain separate. Parental fears of cultural assimilation when their children attended secondary school, whether involving the student body in the main high school or between independent groups of conservative Mennonites, were mostly unfounded.

2006–2009: The Evolution of Teacher-Directed Classes and Specialized Facilities

In 2006, the need for ELAWS to evolve to better serve the diverse needs of their students and community became apparent when an analysis of student outcomes indicated that few students were earning academic credits. As Elaine Good observed, not enough students were graduating. Although ELAWS had enough students enrolled, the students had to earn credits to justify and generate sufficient funding for the additional staffing that supported the program.

In 2006, the ELAWS program reinvented itself in a number of ways. Eventually, the establishment of teacher-directed, timetabled classes, a shortened academic week, a segregated educational setting, co-op, and a parent council, would serve as hallmark features characterizing the latest iteration of the ELAWS program.

The program required more structure, relevance and rigour. The students were self-selecting their days of attendance, making it complex to track, monitor and assess their progress. Much of the

277. Diane Snyder (parent), interview by author, Snyder residence, Hawkesville, April 6, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

attendance was occurring by church group, which was not encouraging integration, something the staff, if not all the parents, was encouraging. In addition, the nature of the ILC work no longer met the interests or preferences of the majority of students. Sitting at a table all day doing independent work was not an ideal method of having curriculum delivered for most of the students.²⁷⁸ As grade eleven student Derrick Martin told a reporter from the *Elmira Independent* newspaper, “The biggest challenge is just to stay motivated. You need to do a lot of work at night.” Martin, who attended class on Mondays, otherwise worked 10-hour days.”²⁷⁹

In an effort to better respond to needs, a meeting of staff and parents was held on March 22, 2006, to review the Mennonite Segregated option at EDSS. Some important questions were reviewed, including What are the requirements of the Mennonite community? Do they want their children to be able to obtain certain jobs? “Did the parents want their children to receive specific courses and a diploma at the high school?” “What will the focus of the program for conservative Mennonites be now that we are in a separate facility for Mennonite students?”²⁸⁰ The staff sought to be more responsive to the community, particularly in light of some recent pushback from parents in reaction to a proposed two-day schedule for grade nines, with one man saying, “We thought you respected our agricultural needs.”²⁸¹

The meeting resulted in a renewed focus within ELAWS, especially relating to the lack of credit accumulation. Although there were suggestions about awarding in-house certificates to students who wanted to upgrade skills without completing a diploma, such ideas were not pursued, as it became clear that ELAWS was to become the route to an OSSD.²⁸² Increasing the success in

278. Jeff Martin, interview.

279. Chuck Kuepfer, “Alternative education program continues to grow” *Elmira Independent*, June 29, 2007.

280. Fromm, notes from meeting at Lions Hall, March 22, 2006, used with permission.

281. Sauder, interview.

282. Fromm, notes, used with permission.

completing the ILC courses, earning credits and achieving a diploma required changes to the program.

Beginning in September 2006, those students with no secondary school credits would attend school for two days, on Mondays and Tuesdays. Low German students with literacy difficulties would attend on Wednesdays and receive ESL support. These changes provided the structure on which ELAWS would continue to evolve. Further program refinements were investigated in response to feedback from parents and students. The following anecdote highlights some of the feedback.

Diane Snyder, a Markham-Waterloo mother of six, had one daughter who was a teenager before ELAWS existed, two sons who went to Countryside for grades nine and ten and ELAWS for eleven and twelve, a daughter who went to grade nine and ten only at ELAWS, and two children, a son and daughter, who completed four years at ELAWS. She, as did others, encouraged a flexible schedule that accounted for the individual student's disposition and that also respected the community preference for work-related experience and learning. She recalled that her oldest boy, Colin, went to ELAWS one day a week. Colin finished his work for grades eleven and twelve in one and a half years, which meant he could start electrician trade school in January at Conestoga College, ahead of a traditional schedule. He benefited from the ability to work independently and accumulate credits in a manner that suited his discipline and work ethic. Her next son, Randy, required the full two years of grade eleven and twelve to graduate prior to attending Conestoga College for an electrical apprenticeship. This was more suited to his disposition.

In both cases, the boys and their family preferred the opportunity to spend more time learning on a job site rather than in a formal classroom. Diane Snyder reiterated that the one day a week schedule for the older students was one of their main reasons for switching to ELAWS, rather than continuing with the five-day week at Countryside. She emphasized that ELAWS was a good

educational option for her children, and one that matched their needs. She also appreciated the flexibility that had been progressively been built into ELAWS such as the use of continuous intake so that students could enter school when it was appropriate for their family and the honouring of any credits that they had earned while attending a parochial school. Many other conservative Mennonite parents agreed, and their feedback helped to bring focused changes that enabled ELAWS to evolve into a responsive secondary school program.

As part of the change, additional staff were hired or assigned to ELAWS. The ability of ELAWS to evolve and grow despite changes in staff is unusual. Often alternative educational programs are founded on the vision and drive of an individual or small group of individuals. When these committed leaders depart, the programs often end.²⁸³ ELAWS was atypical in that it was able to flourish despite regular upheavals. The ability to continually reinvent itself suggests a mutual commitment by both the WRDSB and conservative Mennonites to work together.

By 2006, the focus of ELAWS had shifted from a program serving truant students with unique circumstances to one that acted as a bridge to education for unserved students. The emphasis in the school on being more responsive to unserved or marginalized groups paralleled efforts at the school board level on inclusion, engagement and success for all students. Increasingly, there was system acknowledgement and active support for ELAWS as it represented a meaningful opportunity for the WRDSB to demonstrate its commitment to greater equity and inclusion.

June 2006 marked the departure of McKinney and Ziegel from ELAWS, which represented a major change for students and parents. The principal, Gary Ayre, realized that he had to carefully

283. Gorham's description of the New School matches the history of many alternative schools. "For the most part, these small ventures have left little or no trace in the historical record." The New School, for example, lasted only three years, after a split among the parents in the second year. Deborah Gorham, "The Ottawa New School and Educational Dissent in Ontario in the Hall-Dennis Era," *Historical Studies in Education* (Fall 2009): 104. http://historicalstudiesineducation.ca/index.php/edu_hse-rhe/article/viewFile/2129/2272

consider who would replace both teachers since the trust built between the conservative Mennonite community and the teachers on behalf of the school was hard earned.

Phil Sauder, a teacher at Forest Heights Collegiate in Kitchener, applied for the position when he saw a posting for a teaching position at EDSS commencing September 2006. The only information was that the position was full-time in a Mennonite program. Principal Ayre, business oriented and creatively inclined, was ready to expand this school program and Sauder's interview for the job quickly turned into a brainstorming session. Sauder was a good candidate for an unusual position because he had attended EDSS as a student, had deep roots in the St. Jacobs area, was a Mennonite himself and had a wide-ranging teaching background. He had worked in the public school board as well as at the only local private Mennonite high school, Rockway Mennonite Collegiate. He was a guidance teacher and familiar with the Ministry of Education requirements for earning credits. He had recently spent a few years teaching in Brunei Darussalam, in Asia, in a private Muslim high school.²⁸⁴ All of these experiences contributed to his global, optimistic and innovative perspective on education and learning.

The second teacher hired for September 2006 was Jeff Martin, who had been a machinist in local industries after graduating from EDSS. He had attended Heritage Bible College and Seminary, and was employed as a youth pastor at Wallenstein Bible Chapel, an evangelical church with Mennonite roots. His own family had been part of the Markham-Waterloo church and he still had many relatives in that community.²⁸⁵

A third teacher was hired around this time. Barbara Miller (pseudonym), an itinerant teacher of ESL with the WRDSB, was already working at Wellesley Public School. She had worked with several of the Low German students when they attended elementary school.

284. Sauder, interview.

285. Jeff Martin, interview.

In addition, for the first time there were volunteers willing to support the program. These included Shane Martin, an aspiring teacher with a Markham-Waterloo background, a woman from the community who was willing to offer Spanish lessons at lunch hour, a senior EDSS student who taught art, and a retired elementary school principal who generously made breakfast each Wednesday morning to welcome the Low German students.

Despite a demanding workload, blossoming numbers of students and challenges associated with the move to Lions Hall, this new group of staff and volunteers strove to expand the program by reaching out to the wider conservative and Old Order Mennonite community. The minutes of a November 30, 2006, meeting indicate that contacts were again made with the David Martin Mennonite and Old Order Mennonite groups. Under the heading “Initiatives – Long –Range” a fundamental question for ELAWS was revisited and refined: “Could we strengthen the appeal and grow ELAWS by working with the communities we serve in order to ensure that the program is responding to the needs/wishes of our students and parents?”²⁸⁶

Recruitment efforts from the previous school year, along with current students inviting their friends to join the school, resulted in sixty-one students being enrolled in September 2006. Of these, only eight were Low German. Jeff Martin said that, at this time, the program felt predominantly Markham-Waterloo. The creation of a separate class for some of the Low German Mennonite students, on Wednesdays only, mainly with the ESL teacher,²⁸⁷ represented a renewed effort to engage with and better respond to the learning needs of the Low German students.

The initial course offerings for the Low German students proved to be too difficult, so English Language Development courses were introduced into their Wednesday program. One problem with the development of the separate Low German literacy class was that while these courses were

286. Phil Sauder, agenda for meeting: Fall Update – November 30, 2006.

287. Announcing the decision to start a specialized ESL class in March of 2006 allowed time to hire an appropriate teacher for September 2006.

appropriate and helpful, they did not generate credits or Ministry of Education funding. In addition, the scheduling of the Low German class on Wednesday meant that it was difficult to provide experiential learning opportunities and integrate with the co-op programming established on Monday and Tuesday, which was connected to the bulk of the ELAWS program. Three years later the Wednesday Low German class was cancelled.²⁸⁸ This setback in the effort to address the literacy needs of the Low German was largely due to the inability to differentiate the curriculum within one day of school a week and with limited resources and personnel.

Furthermore, the Low German students did not clearly understand why their component of the program was separate. With the students isolated and lacking support, discipline and attendance problems arose. The literacy program was perceived, by some, to be a slight against the Low German. This outcome generates questions and speculation about the implications of segregation and the issue of choice. For instance, when the overall conservative Mennonite community chose to be segregated from the main school, they viewed this as a positive feature that contributed to their cultural preservation. When the Low German students with literacy challenges were segregated from the broader conservative Mennonite program, for programming support reasons, they viewed this as discriminatory and divisive.

Consequently, in 2009 the Low German were reintegrated into the Monday and Tuesday programming.²⁸⁹ In 2012 Sauder created a new program, ULearn, for Low German students only, which was another component of the evolving ELAWS model.

Throughout 2005–2009, the other Low German, Markham-Waterloo and Midwest Fellowship students actively participated in the ELAWS program on either Monday or Tuesday or both. The grade nines remained in the boardroom at Lions Hall in a classroom-like setting, although

288. Kuepfer, *Elmira Independent*.

289. Sauder, interview.

they sometimes returned to the portable at EDSS.²⁹⁰ In response to feedback from students, staff and parents, the ILC booklets were phased out for the grade nine students and replaced with teacher-directed courses.

During this time Jeff Martin taught all the grade nine subjects. As a teacher with just one year of experience, who had attended teachers' college the summer before, he was on a steep learning curve, trying to absorb all of the course material each night before presenting it the next day. Sauder was taking care of all the subjects for grades ten, eleven and twelve, still using ILC courses. Jeff Martin said that he and Sauder were in "survival mode, just trying to keep their heads above water."²⁹¹ No one was being paid to mark the ILC courses anymore. The main room in Lions Hall was crowded and often noisy with students working independently on so many different courses at once. Sauder and Martin considered getting a portable classroom to be located in the Lions Hall parking lot, but there was not enough space for it.²⁹² The pressures on staff and programming were significant, and adjustments leading to the further evolution of ELAWS were necessary to manage student numbers, learning needs and the related workload.

2006–2008: A Schedule to Accommodate the Agricultural Year

In June 2006, when the first Markham-Waterloo and Midwest Fellowship students were finishing their school year, the WRDSB committed financial resources by sponsoring a research project investigating employment opportunities for potential ELAWS graduates. The WRDSB also provided personnel support for this project. A co-op consultant with the school board interviewed twenty ELAWS students to gain their perspectives on desirable career paths. He summarized their

290. Good, interview.

291. T.D. Regehr reports on a similar scenario when a private Mennonite high school, approved by the government, opened in Coaldale, AB, in 1946. "Grades 9 through 12 were to be offered – an impossible teaching load for two teachers. Some required courses could not be taught, and students took those by correspondence. Library and laboratory facilities were pathetically inadequate, and only exceptional dedication and hard work by teachers and students alike made it possible. Regehr, 253.

292. Jeff Martin, interview.

comments, writing, “Students were proud of their heritage and the linkage to the rural economy... (Nevertheless), a number of students shared the realities of today’s farming environment, noting that it is becoming difficult to operate family-style farms.”²⁹³ The study reinforced the realization that many students were entering ELAWS because of the difficulties and increasing limitations associated with a traditional rural lifestyle; they wanted to develop skills that would make them employable either on or off the farm.²⁹⁴

One consideration in responding to educational and community needs was to tie the school schedule to the agricultural year.²⁹⁵ September 2007 marked the first time that the grade nine and ten students were required to come to school two days a week. Since ELAWS staff had heard from a few parents that they preferred one day a week of schooling for all grades, the staff made an effort to ease the transition to this new schedule, announcing in the June 2007 newsletter that in the coming year the classes for grade nines and tens were to be held one day a week until after the harvest, two days a week during the winter, and one day a week in the spring, until planting was complete.²⁹⁶ Even though the Three Bridges SALEP agreement was available to ELAWS students, and specifically excused children from school to work on their own farms, many ELAWS students did not want to be

293. Jim Fox, *EDSS Mennonite Program Essential Skills Research*, (Waterloo Region District School Board, Waterloo, 2006), 3.

294 Total number of farms in Ontario. 2006: 57,211. 2011: 51,950.

Statistical Summary of Ontario Agriculture. www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/stats/agriculture_summary.htm

Farmland around Kitchener-Waterloo rose in price from \$4000 per acre in 2006 to \$9000 per acre in 2010 and \$11,000 per acre in 2011. “Record prices reported for Ontario farmland as demand and commodities surge, says RE/MAX Serious inventory shortage characterizes the market.” <http://cameronnolan.ca/docs/record-prices-for-ontario-farmland.pdf>.

295 The Essex County Board of Education had instituted a Farm Harvest Leave Program in the 1983–84 school years. In theory, the program allowed qualified students over ten years of age, with the principal’s permission, to have time off from school to assist with the farm harvest for a maximum of fifteen days at the beginning of September. The permission forms were available in English and Low German. By 1989, the Director of Education for the board was writing to growers, asking them to help enforce this rule, as only 153 students had work permits, and many more had failed to register and were not returning to school until October or November. He let the employers know that they would be charged under the *Education Act* if they hired students without a work permit. R. C. Pronger, Essex County director of education, letter to growers, April 18, 1989. See Appendix B: Farm Harvest Leave Form.

296. ELAWS newsletter, June 2007.

part of SALEP, which would permanently excuse them from school. They wanted to attend ELAWS and also work on their farms when necessary.

One Midwest Fellowship student, Sheldon Lichty, who lived in a farming family and had started in ELAWS in 2005, had already created his own agricultural schedule. He had taken a year away from school, between grade eight and grade nine, to work on the home farm. When he heard about the program he was already working full time, over forty hours a week, hauling dirt. Interested in obtaining some secondary credits, he decided to mainly work on the ILC courses on his own and drop them off at the school. In the spring and fall he went to school when he could and in the winter he went one day a week.²⁹⁷ Actual attendance at school did not seem to be a factor in his accumulation of credits.²⁹⁸ Clinton Lichty, Sheldon's brother, also started in 2005, but took a different route through school. He started in grade 9 at ELAWS, but realized he wanted to be a veterinarian. He would need to go to university and ELAWS was not offering any university preparation classes. Clinton, with his parents' permission, switched to classes at EDSS, which his parents approved because he could be a veterinarian and stay in the Mennonite culture.²⁹⁹ As well, since they lived near the veterinary program at the University of Guelph, he could live at home on the farm and participate in church youth activities while he went to university.³⁰⁰

Another former student, a member of a farming family and adherent at a Markham-Waterloo church, Steve Weber also started ELAWS in 2005. His comments provide insight into the changing perspective of some conservative Mennonite farming families. Steve's parents were supportive of

297. Jessalyn Lichty (student), interview by author, Lichty residence, Ariss, April 27, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

298. Jessalyn Lichty, interview.

299. Clinton Lichty was taking a highly unusual career path. As Draper notes, "Higher education is seen as unnecessary and dangerous. A simple agricultural lifestyle keeps one humble and close to God. Those who are university educated can be tempted to take pride in their own knowledge and to be lead astray from the things that really matter." Draper, 216.

300. Jessalyn Lichty, interview.

high school. “Dad’s theory was that they, (he and his brothers), might as well carry on through grade twelve. We couldn’t all be farmers, and even if we were, an education wouldn’t be a bad thing.”³⁰¹

2006: The Introduction of the Parent Council

Another significant initiative that marked the evolution of ELAWS also occurred in 2006 when Sauder introduced a parent council. The parent council was envisioned as a support and advisory body on considerations in creating a primarily conservative Mennonite high school program inside of a public school system.³⁰² The parent council was a familiar concept to the conservative Mennonites. Prior to the public school consolidations in the 1960s, each small school board had had three trustees.³⁰³ When the parochial schools were formed they maintained the same model, and most of the parents of ELAWS students were familiar with the parochial system.

At the beginning of the process, Sauder wanted to create evening events and invite the community to learn about the program and offer feedback. He organized an information night to let parents know about ELAWS and to ask them what they wanted in a high school. In addition, Sauder would talk to parents in the parking lot when they came to collect their children and he noted that this informal chatting went a long way toward creating trust between the teachers and the community. He found that the Mennonite roots that he and Jeff Martin shared with the parents of students helped to develop a connection with the conservative Mennonites.³⁰⁴ Above all, Sauder wanted to create a program that cultivated trust by being open and transparent. He wanted the parents to see that they could contribute to decisions and that they could help to shape the program.³⁰⁵

301. Weber, interview.

302. In 1996, the Ontario government had required all secondary schools to form a parent council consisting of parents, community representatives, the principal, a teacher and a student. The parent council was expected to advise the principal and the school board on issues such as curriculum and program priorities. Gidney, 198.

303. Although conservative Mennonites discourage involvement in government, serving on the local public school boards (before the 1960s) was not questioned. Draper, 78.

304. Jeff Martin’s family was originally members of the Markham-Waterloo community.

305. Sauder, interview.

Sauder envisioned an ongoing advisory parent council.³⁰⁶ To create this, he needed to learn which parents to draw upon. Tim Martin was a natural choice, as he had been helpful in setting up the meeting at Countryside and continued to be involved in ELAWS. Glen Lichty, who had also been at that first meeting, had already asked how he could help. Sauder sought to identify other influential leaders who would be representative of all the church groups, so he often met with parents one-on-one to gauge interest. Sauder wanted men, as this reflected the practices within the conservative church communities.³⁰⁷ He was fortunate to find willing business owners and a church deacon.³⁰⁸ The early parent councils did not have a Low German member, despite Sauder's efforts. This changed over time and Low German men became valuable contributors.

The impact of the parent council on the evolution and sustainability of the ELAWS program was significant. Tim Martin spoke about the depth of involvement of the parent council. "We helped to choose the applied level of courses for the program. This was done to appease the parents who were not interested in encouraging university."³⁰⁹ The parent council also contributed to the idea of an ELAWS grade 12 celebration. Glen Lichty said that both he and a Markham-Waterloo deacon who were in attendance were "blown away" by the Christian atmosphere at a public school graduation. The school administrators were there and they didn't discourage it. He was really impressed.³¹⁰ Jacob Wall, who served as a Low German representative on parent council, spoke about the power of the

306. It was not unheard of for parents to offer advice. Prior to the closing of small rural public schools in the 1960s, many of the children in Woolwich Township public schools were from Mennonite families, and so the local public school boards often had Mennonite trustees. Draper, 78.

307. In 2014, a one-time meeting was held for representative mothers, to elicit their opinions about course offerings. It was an informative meeting. For instance, both the students and staff had considered music classes. (The music teacher at EDSS was a member of the Mennonite Brethren church and would have been willing to join ELAWS). One mother thought guitar lessons would be fine; another mother said that her church did not allow instruments. When vocal music was suggested, a different mother said that her church already had a deep investment in preparing students for bi-annual choir tours. The church choir used a different form of notation for reading music and it would be difficult for the students to adjust. She thought that since the church was taking care of music, the school should focus on more practical skills. As a result, music courses were not offered in ELAWS. Just as in the male parent council, all the participants had to agree to any decision.

308. Jeff Martin, interview.

309. Tim Martin, interview.

310. Glen Lichty, interview.

group. He said that the teachers, Sauder and Martin, really listened to the parents. They were very open to discussion, and all the parents had to agree on an item before it was implemented.³¹¹ He found that interesting. He saw that some parents were stricter than others, and while he didn't want children doing things that were wrong, he wasn't as worried about some rules as others were. Still, nothing was decided upon until they had mutual agreement.³¹²

Glen Lichty pointed out that the parent council allowed the Markham-Waterloo to bring their culture into the public school system, and, just like the students, "We all had to learn from each other. We were all sending our kids there, so we had to listen to the other parents."³¹³ He went on to say that the parent council "helped us to understand each other. We felt free to bring up issues."³¹⁴ He thought that the school was very accommodating. Glen Lichty mentioned that he was always worried that each time the principal changed, the program might end because it was so alternative. Lichty's worries were justified, because there were six principals between 1996 and 2012, but all the principals were supportive.

Some issues that emerged at parent council were expected and others were not. One contentious issue that was not anticipated by the staff was socialization outside of school hours. Sauder and Jeff Martin assumed that the students, like most teenagers, should be socially as well as academically engaged with school. They worked hard to encourage camaraderie by organizing a booth at the Elmira Maple Syrup Festival, offering a volleyball tournament at night, and even

311. The members of the ELAWS parent council had discussions about the degree of separation the students should have from the world. All decisions regarding special events or course changes were taken to the parent council before a decision was made. For instance, at one time the ELAWS teachers suggested that the students go to a Blue Jays game for an end-of-the-year event. Baseball was one of the three games that the conservative Mennonites played regularly, the others being volleyball and ice hockey. Although some students had already gone to Blue Jays games, the proposal was rejected, as there were hints of idolatry at the games with the praise of the players and the mascot. This is a clear example of the phenomena that Johnson-Weiner noted in rural elementary schools in the U. S. which mixed Amish, Mennonites and "worldly" students. She stated that "Mixed schools tend to be more conservative in adopting new texts and new pedagogical practice because of the need to accommodate the most conservative elements." Karen Johnson-Weiner, *Train Up a Child* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). 242.

312. Wall, interview.

313. Glen Lichty, interview.

314. Glen Lichty, interview.

participating in an overnight trip to Ottawa with another Mennonite school group from Listowel. The volleyball evening was important to Jeff Martin because, beyond the social aspect, it allowed the teachers to consult a group of mature grade eleven and twelve boys on their thoughts about ELAWS. The teachers were interested in knowing what the students wanted their school to look like. They wanted to know how to attract new students, and how to make the program even more appealing.

While students seemed to enjoy these social activities, the parents did not. The parent council made it clear that they wanted a “bare bones” program. They did not support promoting social activity beyond students’ daily learning interactions as part of the formal school day. As one parent summarized, the youth had enough going on with their own church youth activities. School should be for school, and that was enough.³¹⁵ Despite the preferences of the students, parent direction shaped the experience of all aspects of ELAWS programming.

2006–2009: Implications of the Shortened Schedule and Separate Facilities

Some of the main discussion topics for both the staff and the parent council were timetabling, course selection, and access to the technical shops in the main school building. Tensions within parental preferences created challenges for ELAWS.³¹⁶ Now, with the increased numbers of students, and the actual purpose of the program changing from literacy instruction to preparation for the skilled trades, the timetable had to adapt. As Glen Lichty said, parents had signed their children up for school so they could enter the trades, but they weren’t actually going into the shops. The school had very good shops in the school for carpentry, machining, electrical, auto mechanics and HVAC, as well as cooking and sewing rooms. It was “a catch 22. The parents wanted their children to be separate, but they wanted an education.”³¹⁷ He also noted that Countryside Christian School, which was now offering classes until grade 12, and thus had become a competitor to ELAWS, had

315. Jeff Martin, interview.

316. Ziegel, interview.

317. Glen Lichty, interview.

built its own technical shops for their high school, which allowed shop experience while remaining separate. However, since the teachers were not licensed, they still could not offer a high school diploma. He did say that the Countryside grade 12 diploma was recognized locally, and that if the Countryside students successfully completed the Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED), they could go to Conestoga College for trade school.³¹⁸ ELAWS needed to adapt.

Former student Steve Weber illustrated the desire to take advantage of the EDSS facilities. His cousin was in his late twenties, going to night school and doing everything he could to earn a high school diploma and gain entry into an electrician's apprenticeship. Weber wanted to bypass all that by completing his schooling while he was still a teenager, now that he had the opportunity.³¹⁹

In 2007 Sauder took the issue of teaching in the shops to the parent council. He needed to take the pulse of the parents. How badly did they want technology training? If they did, the program would have to move into the regular school. Jeff Martin was a qualified technology teacher and one of the reasons why he had been recruited for ELAWS was his ability to teach in many shops. Around 2008, ELAWS started to offer some technology classes on an ad hoc basis, often at lunch hour, when the regular EDSS students were not in the rooms. ELAWS took whatever shop was available, even if it meant teaching carpentry in an auto shop.³²⁰ This was not an ideal way to introduce students to technology, particularly if the goal was to have the students become qualified tradesmen.

Sauder was forced to ask the parent council, which was more important, technology training or separation?³²¹ Regardless of the answer, this type of questioning signalled some erosion in a defining feature of ELAWS, the strict segregation and separation from the regular school setting. In addition, by September 2008, ELAWS had seventy-eight students enrolled who represented all of the

318. Glen Lichty, interview.

319. Weber, interview.

320. Sauder, interview. Breton indicated in his interview that students in the first years of ELAWS learned woodworking skills at lunch hour in an informal class which the carpentry teacher volunteered to teach.

321. Sauder, interview.

church groups. No matter what happened with the parent council's decision about the technology classes, the program needed more physical space. ELAWS was outgrowing Lions Hall with its one big room and one small boardroom.

Students' learning needs had to be addressed as the crowded facilities were un conducive to academic success. Chris Finnie, an addition to the ELAWS staff at the time, recalled that for teaching purposes Lions Hall was divided by cloth screens to create a semblance of separate rooms³²² and that he supervised an optional "homework club" for extra help on Fridays in the EDSS school library. This seems to have been the first mention of any additional instructional days being offered to the students and in a facility within the regular school building. Although adding another day to the schedule for some students would seem to be a substantial change and an intrusion on the preference to limit the amount of time spent in the formal school per week, there is no indication of this as an issue. Perhaps this was because it was optional and those parents whose children chose to attend were glad to have a teacher at the school helping students with their homework.

The introduction of an optional homework club day as part of the ELAWS schedule could have arisen out of previous parent council discussions about homework. Tim Martin remembered that there were some "battles" about the school schedule.³²³ The teachers wanted more schooling, and the parents wanted more work. The attitude of some parents to homework is summed up in the comment, "If a student spends a whole day doing homework, he might as well be at school, since he can't get any work done."³²⁴ Some Low German parents were particularly irritated by homework and wondered why this was necessary when their children were at school all day.³²⁵ Despite the parental

322. Finnie, interview.

323. Tim Martin, interview.

324. Tim Martin, interview.

325. Lily Hiebert Rempel and Dave Tiessen, "Observations of Changes" (lecture, Low German Service Providers Resourcing Day, Community Mennonite Fellowship, Drayton, ON, November 21, 2013).

debate about homework, the one day a week program for senior students was extremely popular with the students themselves.³²⁶

Jessalyn Lichty, a former student who belonged to the Midwest Fellowship, said that she would have liked to come to school more often, but that the regular school was not an option for girls in her family. It was emphasized to her that she would not have had an opportunity to learn valuable lessons at home if she had “been sitting in the books.”³²⁷ On her days at home, she was able to acquire skills in sewing, canning, cooking and barn work. Jessalyn Lichty concluded that the two-day-a-week model accommodated the needs of farmers for their children’s labour. She was clear that the model indicated a respect for Mennonite values; the balance of work and school let them maintain their culture.³²⁸

2008: ELAWS Seeks Equitable Resources from the WRDSB

In September 2008, Peter Rubenschuh was assigned to EDSS as the new principal, the fifth since the advent of ELAWS. He was an experienced principal and was familiar with EDSS because his children attended the school and he lived in Linwood, a nearby village. Yet, Rubenschuh quickly realized that there were nuances in the needs of both the community and the school that he was just beginning to understand.³²⁹

In addition to realizing that ELAWS was quite different from what he had initially assumed and that it was even less well understood by the school community and system leaders, Rubenschuh recognized that the program needed to be more accountable if it was to be treated equitably in terms

326. When the first class to finish their studies at EDSS commented about their memories of ELAWS in the 2009–2010 yearbook, seven of the nineteen graduating students recalled that the ability to combine one day of school along with work was their best memory. *ELAWS Yearbook 2009–2010*.

327. “While a basic level of education was important, too much learning encouraged a person to think himself above manual labour. . . This work ethic, with its emphasis on physical labour continued in the twentieth century in the Elmira area. . . The idea that a person who reads too much is lazy has persisted in some parts of Mennonite culture.” Draper, 74.

328. Jessalyn Lichty, interview.

329. Peter Rubenschuh (principal), interview by author, Elmira District Secondary School, February 27, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

of staffing and facilities. He recognized that without explicit data about the number of credits attempted by students in ELAWS, he could not hire more teachers. The lack of structure in ELAWS also worked against it being equitably resourced. The use of ILC courses, as well as non-credit alternative courses not recognized by the Ministry of Education, and overly flexible student attendance practices resulted in fewer credits and inconsistent enrolment reporting, which undermined the ability to access and utilize funding that student numbers could otherwise generate. The seventy-five students should have generated sections of guidance and student success time beyond what it had access to. ELAWS could also contribute funding that would benefit the school and system in regard to facilities, transportation, maintenance and infrastructure. It appeared that without appropriate practices and accurate data, ELAWS students were not receiving the service to which they were entitled.

Among the accountability considerations that Rubenschuh investigated was the integrity of courses being offered in one or two days of in-school instruction a week. Sauder, Martin and Finney provided Rubenschuh with course outlines, based on Ministry-approved ILC courses, and indicated the amount of independent work each student was expected to complete for each course.

Rubenschuh's investigation, supported by evidence from various sources, satisfied the course requirements and equivalencies required to grant credits. Once the value of the courses had been established, Rubenschuh turned his attention to appropriate staffing and resources supports.

While Rubenschuh recognized that the ELAWS teaching staff were dedicated, experienced and possessed unique expertise, he also believed that the program could benefit from an influx of additional insight, innovation and collaboration. Rubenschuh felt that for ELAWS to thrive it would

be important to draw on the experience of the full EDSS staff, so that they could contribute fresh ideas and be aware that ELAWS needed rooms and resources.³³⁰

Everyone recognized that it was crucial to have the right staff. Glen Lichty said, “Everyone was working to find teachers who would understand and work with the culture.”³³¹ Tim Martin agreed, “It was very, very important that teachers understood the parents. It’s what was coming home from school with their children that the parents heard.”³³² A pamphlet distributed by ELAWS reinforced this sentiment, describing the teachers as “understanding and appreciating the values and traditions of our students.”³³³ The importance of having staff who understood and responded to the preferences and interests of their students and community was echoed in observations by Fromm. She recalled that the staff had been incredibly dedicated. “They were unbelievably willing to try to understand the community. They worked hard to find materials that were acceptable to the parents.”³³⁴

As ELAWS continued to grow, Rubenschuh asked about the appropriate qualities needed in the staff.³³⁵ He wanted teachers who were subject specialists. He wanted technology classes to be taught by skilled technology teachers in areas of mechanics, electricity, and machining. He was particularly interested in hiring qualified English and Mathematics teachers as these were compulsory courses in every grade. In addition to having credentials, Rubenschuh recognized that teachers in the ELAWS program needed to be hard working, flexible and willing to learn about, and respect, other cultures.³³⁶

330. Rubenschuh, interview.

331. Glen Lichty, interview.

332. Tim Martin, interview.

333. Elmira Life and Work School. *W5 and More!* nd.

334. Fromm, interview.

335. Rubenschuh, interview.

336. Rubenschuh, interview.

Rubenschuh concluded that if ELAWS was going to deliver a program that was of a high quality, consistent, and equitable, it needed to be integrated into the formal structures and practices of the school and system. He and others worked toward this goal while acknowledging the faith-based underpinnings of the program and the need for segregation from the mainstream school. He considered that a move into the school, with the parent council's approval, would be a "gradual trust building exercise," involving the day-to-day work of the teachers, parents and students.³³⁷

Rubenschuh was convinced that if they could have a meaningful, respectful and open conversation, the parent council, and the parents, would become less guarded and more comfortable. He assured them that the school was not trying to change their culture. He recognized that the parent council was struggling with various issues such as how to offer hands-on-learning in the shops while remaining separate. Ultimately, like Wombwell many years before him, Rubenschuh let the parents know, "We respect you for your beliefs, and we have something to offer."³³⁸

2009–2012: Challenges and Opportunities of Returning to the EDSS Campus

In 2009, the situation had been considered and the decision had been made: after four years at Lions Hall, and a tremendous growth in student numbers, ELAWS returned to the campus of EDSS. Several families removed their children from school in response to this move. The number of Markham-Waterloo and Midwest Fellowship participants dropped from seventy-eight in 2008–2009 to fifty-five in 2009–2010. Fortunately, other parents and students seemed to be content with the move, and the overall enrollment in the program stayed at seventy-eight students.³³⁹ Sauder was convinced that if they offered a good product, and delivered it well, the program would keep growing.³⁴⁰ He heard dismissive comments such as, "The program has changed so much," and, "It's

337. Rubenschuh, interview.

338. Rubenschuh, interview.

339. See Appendix F: Number of Students by Church Affiliation.

340. Sauder, interview.

not like it used to be.”³⁴¹ Nevertheless, the move had been made, in large part, as a response to student and parental requests.

Arrangements related to the move included offering English and Mathematics courses in two portables dedicated solely to ELAWS and adjacent to the school. The portables were nicknamed “the barn” and “the shed.”³⁴² Practical courses, including Technology Shops, Sewing, Cooking, Art and Computers were provided in the main school building. Although located in the school, the ELAWS classes continue to be segregated from the mainstream classes. Grades nine and ten attended on Mondays and Tuesdays; the senior students came on either Monday or Tuesday, as was their choice. The Wednesday class ended. All the courses were taught by teachers and no longer through ILC booklets. The intent was that these would be more engaging and would encourage greater credit accumulation.³⁴³ Subject specialists drawn from the school staff were used. These changes created additional opportunities for the ELAWS program, far beyond the use of the technology shops.³⁴⁴

The parent council took an active role in shaping the additional programming. In addition to compulsory courses that all students in Ontario had to complete to earn their grade twelve diploma, the parent council members were asked for preferences regarding additional optional classes. Not surprisingly, the parents wanted hands-on classes and the students seemed to agree.

Former student Anna Unger, the oldest child of seven, and the first in her extended family to attend secondary school, was a Low German Mennonite and a member of the Old Colony Mennonite church. In 2008 Anna graduated from Three Bridges and the principal encouraged her to go further in

341. Sauder, interview.

342. Sauder, interview.

343. In June of 2013 there was an 80 percent graduation rate for students who had entered ELAWS in grade nine, in 2009, and had only teacher-directed courses. There was a 100 percent graduation rate for students who first entered ELAWS in grade ten, eleven or twelve and had only teacher-directed courses. This clearly indicates that teacher-directed courses were effective in delivering curriculum and generating the successful completion of credits. Students who entered ELAWS in higher years (grades ten, eleven, twelve) did not come directly from elementary school and made a conscious decision to enter secondary school. This may have accounted for their high degree of success in accumulating credits.

344. Sauder, interview; Jeff Martin interview; Rubenschuh interview.

her formal education. She loved school and was not ready to quit, but wanted to work. Her family owned their home outside of Heidelberg, and were not travelling to Mexico for long periods of time each year. Unger was nervous about going to EDSS, as she was sure she would not fit in because of her traditional clothing.

Anna's parents were nervous to see their oldest child enter high school. They wondered about the amount of technology to which she would be exposed. They realized that Unger "would obviously make friends at school and wondered if she would want to go to another church?"³⁴⁵ ELAWS seemed to be the solution to their dilemma. ELAWS offered hands-on courses from which Anna would benefit from, including a supervised computer course. Unger remembered really enjoying the practical courses. She took an art course in grade nine with a small class of girls and a volunteer teacher. Her favourite subjects were cooking, sewing and accounting. After graduating in 2012, Anna took online accounting preparation courses through Conestoga College.³⁴⁶ Unger was the first Low German to graduate with the highest overall grade twelve marks in the ELAWS program. Although there was anxiety among students, parents and staff regarding the outcomes of the change associated with the return of ELAWS to the EDSS campus, experiences such as those of Anna Unger highlighted the opportunities related to the change.

Another benefit of moving to the EDSS campus was improved relationships between the different groups of students, which Sauder attributed to the expansion and focus on hands-on courses. As an example, he shared his delight in observing a senior Hospitality and Tourism class. The students were all preparing Korean food in the Family Studies classroom, and they were mixed by gender, age and church communities. They were all getting to know each other and learning to use chopsticks. Sauder also thought that the change provided opportunities for challenging stereotypes or

345. Unger, interview.

346. Unger, interview.

preconceived ideas about others. As an example, Sauder highlighted how technology classes were useful in positively integrating the Low German among their classmates. The Low German boys tended to be proficient when working with the machines, which showed the other students that the Low German could do well at school.³⁴⁷

In November 2010, one year after the move back to the main school campus, Sauder reflected on the importance of the move from ILC courses to formal classes at a parent–teacher night.

It felt a bit like trying to carry hay bales from the field to the barn one at a time. Just as a wagon would help to carry the load of hay, a classroom structure would help us achieve our goal of building a high school diploma program with a unique structure...Classroom learning allowed a solid pathway to a high school diploma with a strong emphasis on practical courses with real working world applications.³⁴⁸

Another opportunity arising from the move was the predictable, structured timetable, which allowed ELAWS to provide a more meaningful co-op experience for students. Once the core teachers did not have to teach so many students, in so many subject areas, they could formalize co-op on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Friday remained an extra help day, but was now conducted in an ELAWS portable, instead of the school library, an agreement to help keep the students separate from the regular school whenever possible.

As a result of the move and associated changes, all of the students in ELAWS were taking at least two co-op credits per semester. Typically in Ontario, co-op was not permitted until age sixteen, or grade eleven, but in ELAWS, it was available in every grade. This major concession was

347. Sauder, “Parent-Teacher Event” (Speech, Lions Hall, Elmira, November 24, 2010).

348. Sauder, “Parent-Teacher Event.”

permissible, according to provincial policy, for a unique group of students. The WRDSB's support for the designation of students in ELAWS as unique was significant and reinforced the primacy of experiential learning and work experience as a key feature of ELAWS. As a result, all students were employed during the week, whether they were paid or unpaid. The addition of co-op to the timetables of the ELAWS teachers helped them to complete all co-op responsibilities and ensure compliance with legislative requirements. This meant that rather than trying to accommodate a variety of changing and unpredictable demands, teachers ensured the integrity and intent of the co-op credits. Most students collected hundreds of hours of actual work and completed learning activities far beyond the minimum 110 hours and related requirements for earning a co-op credit.

The changes gave ELAWS an opportunity to appropriately focus on and teach co-op in a manner that facilitated more connections with the community. Because of the "unique" designation, the standard school-board-sanctioned practices that forbade working for relatives were adjusted. Unlike any other high school in the WRDSB, in ELAWS students could work for family members and with church associates. The ability to have students work on home farms honoured existing informal apprenticeship systems and reinforced the culture of each group.

Work was important, and Wall felt, like others from different conservative Mennonite groups, that co-op was a good thing, and that the students needed to work to learn. He thought that the regular high school produced graduates who knew how to work computers, but did not know how to do the practical work in the shops.³⁴⁹ Tim Martin agreed, and referred disparagingly to a feeling of "entitlement" that some regular stream students had about being able to take on employment on

349. Wall, interview.

computers without ever learning to do the practical.³⁵⁰ Weber mentioned that co-op was excellent because it allowed the students to “learn to work, an important part of the Mennonite culture.”³⁵¹

Former student Quinton Wideman, an excellent student who enjoyed learning, embodied this belief. Quinton was a Markham-Waterloo student who, very unusually for his church group, attended the regular high school. He wanted to take university-level courses that could challenge him, particularly in math and technology. Quinton was so proficient in technology courses that he competed in Skills Canada, an industry-driven competition for thousands of high school students, winning the gold medal for technology at the provincial level three years in a row. The EDSS staff and his enrichment teacher were all urging him to pursue engineering at university. Quinton, though, had wanted to be an electrician since grade eight, and he knew that he could accumulate 1300 hours of employment toward an electrical apprenticeship if he did the co-op courses in ELAWS, after having taken all the technology courses the regular high school offered by the end of grade eleven.³⁵² He did not want to delay getting married for years while he attended school; he did not want to work in an office; and he “didn’t want to go to university and have a pile of debt.”³⁵³ Consequently, he switched to the ELAWS program for grade twelve, in 2011. Quinten used the ELAWS program to realize his dreams.

In spite of the benefits there were still challenges for ELAWS. In his 2016 study of alternative school programs for Low German students in Ontario, Brubacher reported that some alternative programs were criticized for not offering a variety of co-op job opportunities to students. His study found that perhaps more Low German students would attend high school if they thought they could

350. Tim Martin, interview.

351. Weber, interview.

352. Quinton Wideman (student), interview by author, Wideman residence, Yatton, April 27, 2017, transcript, University of Waterloo.

353. Wideman, interview.

do their co-op placements in settings that would lead to a skilled trade. Brubacher suggested that co-op teachers try to find student jobs outside of the traditional Low German machine shops.³⁵⁴

Brubacher's criticism and suggestion was familiar to teachers in the ELAWS program but was also one that was fraught with challenge when trying to address it. Despite concerted efforts to find job opportunities in diverse areas such as robotics, custom cabinetry where cutting-edge design software was used, and brick laying, where jobs went unfilled, teachers found that most ELAWS students were unwilling to try a co-op placement that was unfamiliar to them. Although a few students were anxious to learn a new skill-set, mainly as mechanics, most preferred to complete their co-op placements with their relatives. This is not particularly surprising, as one of the reasons that parents allowed their children to enrol in the ELAWS program was the ability to maintain their traditional informal apprenticeship systems.³⁵⁵ The propensity to stick to the familiar caused some parents to ask why they should bother sending the students to school at all, if a student continued in the same type of job after school as when they started, and they did not need an OSSD. Another challenge that became more evident and unsettling with the promise of access to an OSSD for all ELAWS students was that few students were choosing to pursue employment that actually required the diploma.³⁵⁶ This was a paradox for the teachers, who sought to offer the students a route to skilled employment. Although the staff did emphasize that students learned other things at school beyond training leading to specific trade, such as improved communication skills, many parents and employers continued to believe that ELAWS was failing to deliver on the possibility of entry into a high demand, lucrative trade that expanded student opportunities beyond those that were most familiar to them.

354. Brubacher, 61.

355. Personal observation of author.

356. Only 17 percent of students in ELAWS, between 2009 and 2014, chose a career where an OSSD was a prerequisite for employment.

Some parents were worried that a high school education would make their children feel self-sufficient, and therefore not need God. Most, however, recognized that ELAWS focused on practical employment skills, rather than philosophy, and the program was a safe way to earn a diploma, the minimum standard for many jobs.³⁵⁷ On balance, the changes associated with the move to the EDSS campus appeared to enhance the positive perception of ELAWS as a helpful educational program that largely addressed many of the unique needs of the conservative Mennonite community.

Other opportunities emerged with the implementation of full co-op credits. Workplace safety and other training were provided on newly created Co-op Integration Days. This included Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) certification, training about labour laws, including the ages required to undertake certain jobs, and the right to say no to unsafe work. In 2011, for instance, students were provided with training for farm and construction safety, and all of the senior students received First Aid certification. Some of the students were given training in the safe operation of forklift trucks, chain saws and power tools, all of which the employer (who was often the parent) did not have to pay for.³⁵⁸

Another example of opportunity arising with the move to EDSS is illustrated in the example of Jessalyn Lichty, from the Midwest Fellowship. She used her co-op placements to identify a career she would come to love. In her senior years she was working close to full-time hours as a caregiver for a non-Mennonite family. While there she decided to pursue training in the Early Childhood Education course at college. This was a major decision and also an unusual career route in the

357. Karen Johnson-Weiner recorded an interesting observation by an Amish teacher in the U. S. regarding high school and the Amish. He expected that there would eventually be high skill level courses offered in their parochial school setting. He did not think it would necessarily improve the community, but he thought it would happen. He observed, "Already a factory had this policy: you must have a high school diploma to apply here...unless you are Amish! I don't think that is a very good plan. It is not fair and will result in bitter feeling toward Amish." Johnson-Weiner, 241.

358. Jeff Martin, interview.

conservative Mennonite world. Jessalyn Lichy acknowledged gender disparity in the community as she explained:

It's still very much in the Mennonite culture, if a woman gets married and has children that she stays at home with the children. For a guy, you know he's going to the provider, and whether married or single, he is going to work for the rest of his life, so he needs more schooling. But to spend all that money (tuition) on a girl, unless that's really what she is meant to do, it's not quite as encouraged.³⁵⁹

Jessalyn Lichy's example offers some evidence that the opportunity associated with the move to EDSS and subsequent expansion of program offerings may have been of benefit in addressing gender inequity in some conservative Mennonite groups. Jessalyn Lichy became one of the very first and very few, ELAWS graduates to attend college full time. She credited some of this accomplishment to the co-op integration days. She remarked that she would not have learned about such a variety of jobs if she had not attended a public secondary school. Still, she cautioned ELAWS to never put pressure on parents to let their children go to post-secondary education. "Put the information out there, but recognize that some families would not consider college an option." Jessalyn Lichy said her own experiences proved that, "you can get more education without walking away from your faith."³⁶⁰

In another instance, for one student the move to EDSS could be regarded as an opportunity or a challenge depending on one's perspective. Charmaine Reimer was a member of Countryside church but she did not want to go to a Christian school. However, her mother did not want her to attend a

359. Jessalyn Lichy, interview.

360. Jessalyn Lichy, interview.

public school because of worries about music and smoking. In 2011 she and her mother compromised on ELAWS for grades eleven and twelve. While Reimer recognized that ELAWS was largely a Mennonite program, she believed that it was the best compromise available for her and her mother. She graduated and went to Kenya to volunteer in an orphanage. At the time of her interview in 2017, Reimer no longer considered herself a Mennonite, but rather an evangelical Christian. She did not cover her hair and she was wearing jeans. Reimer had put her OSSD to work. She was studying to be a primary teacher at a university in Nairobi. The result may have been preferable for Reimer but it also reflected the fears of many in the conservative Mennonite community that public education would fragment their community and cause their children to reject long-held cultural and religious values.

One challenge for ELAWS that emerged as a result of the move to the EDSS campus was the reactions and suspicion generated among some other staff. In September 2009, with a total of seventy-eight students from all church groups enrolled and participating in classes on the EDSS campus, ELAWS was much more visible to the rest of the school staff. Co-op, while a hallmark of the program, was not the only subject offered, and other departments, with their expectations, practices and ownership relating to certain courses, wanted to offer their perspective on their role in relationship to ELAWS. Most of them saw the merit of the initiative, but were generally unsure or skeptical of the two-day timetable and how it would mesh with the rest of the school.³⁶¹ They were willing to help, but some department heads were not enthused about giving up teaching sections to what they perceived as a part-time program.³⁶² This was an area of particular concern for both Rubenschuh and Sauder. Rubenschuh hoped to raise the capacity of everyone, including the teachers

361. Wombwell, interview.

362. Sauder, interview.

and the mainstream parents, to see the potential in ELAWS and Sauder wanted to avoid negativity that might undermine the program and relationships among staff, students and community.

While Sauder and Rubenschuh had good intentions, within a year of arriving at EDSS, Rubenschuh left the school when he was promoted to assistant superintendent at the school board. During his time at EDSS, he met two of the goals he had identified for ELAWS. One was to legitimize the program, and the second was to connect ELAWS to the appropriate resources to which it was entitled.³⁶³ Rubenschuh continued to advocate for ELAWS in his role as a superintendent of education with responsibilities for Equity and Inclusion. He also occasionally attended ELAWS parent council meetings. This, among other personal connections, helped reassure the parent council members that their voices were heard at the school and system level. Maintaining meaningful personal connections contributed to a spirit of trust, and was another example of the type of opportunity that the move to EDSS afforded.

In an effort to build on the positive opportunity and mitigate the challenge regarding ELAWS's presence in the school, Sauder continually worked to promote understanding and create good relationships. He organized a presentation about ELAWS at a staff meeting. He invited Barb Draper to speak to interested staff members about the variety of Mennonites in the school district. Wombwell, who was now the head of the guidance department, remembered when ELAWS grew to one hundred students, around 2012, and moved from being an outlier to a program that eventually comprised one-tenth of the EDSS student population. "That was a goal, a target."³⁶⁴ Sauder and Wombwell explained to the EDSS teachers that ELAWS was important in creating teaching jobs and generating funding that benefited the entire school. They recognized that the time necessary to educate staff about ELAWS would reap benefits in terms of co-operation and support. Wombwell

363. Rubenschuh, interview.

364. Wombwell, interview.

emphasized that ELAWS provided new students to the school system; they were not taken from other high schools. Wombwell asked rhetorically, “Where else is there an opportunity in the whole school board to grow a school by 10 percent, simply by listening and offering a flexible program that someone wants?”³⁶⁵

Another challenge identified with the move to EDSS concerned the fears of the full-time ELAWS staff, who were accustomed to doing things their own way at Lions Hall, and now they were “stepping out from behind the barn.”³⁶⁶ At the beginning of 2009 Sauder was afraid that the ELAWS students would see too much, at the same time as the regular staff would see teachers and students who did too little.³⁶⁷ For instance, should ELAWS attend whole school assemblies or not? If they did participate, would the subject matter be appropriate? If they did not participate, other staff members might think that the ELAWS teachers were shirking their duties, even though the ELAWS parents could see that the students were separate, which was a positive outcome from a parental perspective.³⁶⁸

An extraordinary challenge that confronted students, staff and community that corresponded to the move to EDSS involved an issue of public safety and scandal. In early 2010, a teacher from EDSS, who was assigned to ELAWS to teach one class of mathematics, was charged by the police with sexual exploitation.³⁶⁹ This incident had the potential to be a heavy blow to the program. As soon as he heard the news, Sauder phoned every parent connected with ELAWS. He pointed out that

365. Wombwell, interview.

366. Sauder, interview.

367. The ELAWS teachers were subjected to a lot of “teasing” by their fellow staff members about how wonderful it must be to have a two-day work week. The regular school staff could not see that the few ELAWS teachers were essentially running a ‘school within a school,’ and fulfilling all the roles of a traditional school, including administration, guidance, sports activities, and teaching every subject area, along with monitoring co-op. It was not until more of the specialized staff from EDSS was integrated into ELAWS on a part-time basis, as Rubenschuh had suggested, that the challenges of teaching in ELAWS became better understood. Personal observation of author.

368. Sauder, interview.

369. D. Wood, “Teacher found guilty of sex with girl, 17,” *Waterloo Region Record*, June 22, 2011, <http://www.therecord.com/news-story/2581656-teacher-found-guilty-of-sex-with-girl-17/>

the teacher had only taught ELAWS students for a few weeks and that the alleged crime had occurred outside of the school environment. Most important, Sauder asked for the understanding of the parents in the face of a difficult situation. He asked for their trust, and it was given. While there was the possibility of the wholesale withdrawal of the conservative Mennonite students, not a single family left the program. Sauder's commitment to openness and transparency, and his quick move to communicate with all parents was critical to the positive response of the parents. The atmosphere of trust that had been created in the previous years was rewarded, and ELAWS continued to thrive.

No matter how dire the challenges, the enrolment numbers, program offerings or the location, ELAWS remained viable as it adapted and evolved because of a commitment to core principles. Sauder reiterated some of these at an evening event on November 24, 2010, involving both ELAWS staff and parents. The first principle was a respect for the unique religious and cultural traditions of the community of families. The second was a commitment to open communication with both students and parents in order to hear and respond to the needs of the community. Finally, there was continued dedication to the development of a unique program that balanced the three building blocks of ELAWS: life, work and school. Life, with recognition of the emphasis on family, community and church; work, which served as a valued forum for learning whether at home, on the farm, in outside employment or through volunteer opportunities; and school, which offered a credible diploma program through the expertise of qualified staff using appropriate facilities and responsive programming. Despite the many challenges over the years, there were 110 students in ELAWS by 2010 and twenty graduates. Clearly the program was working well, and making a difference in the lives of students.³⁷⁰ By any standards, and for over fourteen years at that time, ELAWS was a success.

370. Sauder, speech.

2005–2012: Lessons Learned

The experiences leading up to and including the significant growth and sustaining of ELAWS from 2005 to 2012 offer insights and examples that help answer the primary research question of this thesis: has the conservative Mennonite understanding of public secondary education moved from rejection to acceptance?

One insight relates to the rationale and ethics of a public school system in supporting a program for students with a clear religious affiliation. While the discussion continues, one argument has survived scrutiny for many years in support of such a program. When asked about the appropriateness of a public school system offering programming for groups that had a clear affiliation to an identifiable and distinctive religious and cultural heritage, Phil Sauder kept providing the same perspective. He stated that other groups might want a private school, but they were willing to send their children to a public school. These groups of conservative Mennonites would not. ELAWS was providing a formal education to a group of people who would otherwise not participate.³⁷¹

The collaboration between the conservative Mennonite communities and the public school board, which has continued unabated for two decades, suggests that the conservative Mennonites felt there was merit in co-constructing an educational model for the use of their communities. In the 1960s, the conservative Mennonites had withdrawn from the public school system, but now, approximately fifty years later, conservative Mennonites could see that the public school system they had rejected might have something to offer.

Other indications about the extent to which the conservative Mennonite understanding of public secondary education has moved from rejection to acceptance relates to the willingness and ability of participants in ELAWS to adapt and, in some cases, reframe their viewpoints and perspectives. Many in the conservative Mennonite communities were interested in allowing their sons

371. Sauder, interview.

and daughters to earn a diploma so that they could engage in occupations beyond farming. This represented a historical change and departure from a long-held perspective in a society that valued working on the land above all other vocations. Some of the parents of 2004 recognized that with the advent of a new millennium their children would need additional skills. This shift in viewpoint could also be applied to the WRDSB, which demonstrated its acceptance of the need to accommodate self-segregating religious groups. The experiences that shaped ELAWS between 2005 and 2012 contributed to the development of a program that allowed three conservative Mennonite groups to accept the opportunity to engage in secondary schooling.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

On an October morning in 2011, twenty-nine girls and sixty-six boys prepared to make as many apple crisp desserts as they could in one hour. They were seated around tables with knives in their hands, and holding bowls and measuring spoons. Crates of apples donated by parents stood at one end of Lions Hall and empty aluminum trays at the other end of the large room, waiting to be filled. Teacher Ken Reid had spent hours creating an elaborate, but efficient, plan that had a job for each student. Two other teachers were at the ready. Adam Hiller was ready to direct the runners who would carry ingredients from one table to the next and Jeff Martin was positioned to make sure that no one cut off a finger while coring apples. John Neufeld, the director of the House of Friendship, a Mennonite-sponsored shelter for homeless men, was ready to receive the final products as a donation from ELAWS. All was ready. The Great Apple Crisp Assembly line was about to begin. At least that was the theory.

The diverse group of students from grades nine to grade twelve and eight different church groups were poised to work together. But there were a few hitches. Some students did not like their tasks and kept changing positions. Some boys did not want to wear their aprons and flung them toward the girls. Thankfully, someone noticed the students were using tablespoons for cinnamon when they should be using teaspoons. Some students started eating the apples.

Clearly it was time for a few changes. Ken Reid examined the master plan and convinced students to agree to a compromise about where they were placed. Teacher Phil Sauder took over the flimsy plastic wrap station and tried to hold everything together. Jeff Martin still kept an eye on anyone with a knife, while trying to explain the ELAWS program to John Neufeld. Adam Hiller was ready to direct traffic around the assorted obstacles in the room.

The second attempt to start the assembly line began well, and then a big backlog built up as flour and sugar kept flowing but the apple slicers could not keep up. Teacher Janice Harper had started the lines too quickly. It was another typical day in the world of the Elmira Life and Work School. Lots of good intentions, lots of adjustments, and lots of laughter.³⁷² For ELAWS, the assembling of apple crisp desserts was a lot like creating a new school program. Compromises and adjustments were constantly made in order to reach an agreeable conclusion.

In the 2011–2012 school year, ninety-five conservative Mennonite students were enrolled in high school; these numbers could suggest that ELAWS was a success. Certainly, the program was an unqualified success in creating opportunities for secondary schooling for conservative Mennonites, where none had existed prior to 1996. Despite this, the program still faced challenges, with points of tension both within and outside the program.

Within the program, the staff continued to grapple with disparities between what the parents, and therefore the parent council, wanted educationally, and what the teachers felt was needed. The conservative Mennonites valued conformity and obedience and were discouraged from expressing creativity and individualism, whether through dress, speech or thought.³⁷³ This reflects what Karen Johnson-Weiner observes, when she emphasizes that in Old Order schools (which could include a variety of Mennonite parochial schools), “children do not study why they do things in particular ways, but they learn that there are particular ways in which things must be done.”³⁷⁴

At the same time, the teachers, as employees of the WRDSB, one of the larger school boards in Ontario, with 63,000 students in 120 schools, were encouraged to offer twenty-first century

372. This anecdote is based on a personal observation of the author.

373. In March of 2012, I observed a class of kindergarten-aged students in an elementary parochial school. The students sat in desks that were in perfectly straight rows, creating identical art projects about the Garden of Gethsemane for a display at Easter. The students were expected to copy the model on the blackboard, exactly. Each student had to place their crosses at the same height, in the same colours, on matching background papers.

374. Johnson-Weiner, 233.

learning. The school board's mission statement included the following points: the WRDSB prepares, challenges, and inspires learners to be engaged, connected and contributing global citizens, and all students, staff and community members with whom the Board interacts participate in and benefit from the rich learning environment and the joy of discovery and personal growth.³⁷⁵ The teachers' mandate as employees of WRDSB could clash with their mandate as teachers of youth from an anti-modern culture.

Many of the students and parents connected to ELAWS were adapting as well as they could to an ever-changing world that included advanced technology and cell phones. The Low German in particular were adjusting to massive changes in their lifestyles, from the country where they lived, to employment choices, to making decisions as independent families rather than on a communal basis. In fact, the conservative Mennonites who entered the ELAWS sphere were adapting to the new world at a fast pace, while maintaining the right to make the choices they wanted.

It is important to note that while the focus of this thesis has been on the compromises made between a school system and religious minorities, other compromises were made within church groups and individual families at the prospect of entering a public secondary school. Secondary school participation was such a new concept that individual families had to negotiate their positions with regard to both family and female participation, while considering the opinions of their church and their extended family and community.

As religious minorities who have traditionally shunned secondary schooling, and drawn boundaries around their formal education system, their viewpoints are relatively uninfluenced by state policies. Education is based on the requirements of the family, the church, and the Bible, none of which are prescribed by the state school system. The three conservative Mennonite groups in this

375. "Waterloo Region District School Board" Institute for Education Leadership, <https://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/en/resources/strong-districts-their-leadership/board-profile/Waterloo-Region-District-School-Board>

study place far more importance on maintaining their informal educational traditions than on changing theories in state education.

The ELAWS program was in constant change over its history. There were challenging times for the individual students, staff, and cultural groups. Most of the parents who had taken the giant step of engaging with secondary education for the sake of their children's futures were trying as well as they could to accept the new worldly influences upon their children. Other parents, however, resisted and would not allow their daughters to attend high school, expected the teachers to focus on rote learning work sheets, and discouraged the use of any texts that conflicted with Mennonite orthodoxy. These parents and community leaders were struggling with questions of modernity and identity and, like their counterparts in the non-conservative Mennonite world, were realizing this struggle in the way they educated their children. For some parents, the early confrontations with secular authorities over school consolidation and the requisite years of mandatory schooling had left them united in their desire to hold on to their old ways.³⁷⁶

This, among other ongoing tension(s), was sometimes problematic. The staff spent countless hours debating the meaning of formalized education as it related to the conservative Mennonite context. This is reflected, throughout this thesis, in several examples of initiatives that were proposed and then abandoned in an effort to better meet perceived conservative Mennonite needs. These included discussions about moving ELAWS farther away from Elmira District Secondary School (EDSS), offering a school completion certificate at the end of grade ten and inviting Old Order Mennonites and David Martin Mennonites to participate in safety training sessions. Each of these proposals involved countless hours of work before they were jettisoned.

The tension manifested itself in other ways. In co-op settings the teachers often heard from students who were interested in pursuing a trade such as auto mechanics, which would involve years

376. Johnson-Weiner, 236.

of reduced pay while attending community college. In some cases, the parents were willing to allow their sons to enter the trade, but the students could only see that they would earn a few dollars less per hour while training. As a result, students frequently turned down long-term training opportunities, leading to a lucrative career, that the teachers had worked hard to create.

In addition, teachers observed and experienced intense peer pressure among their students in the program. Students readily conformed to the expectations of others in the class from their church groups, sometimes to the extent of looking at each other, and checking if it was “okay”³⁷⁷ before raising their hand to respond to a question. There was little discussion in the classes.³⁷⁸ Debate and questioning was frowned on in the conservative Mennonite culture and as a result, the students did not ask questions or debate ideas with each other or with the teachers and guest speakers. There were commonly held assumptions, often shared among a group of students, which contributed to tensions within the learning environment. For example, there was occasionally a lack of respect for teachers; the teachers, including myself, were aware that some students expected the staff to be thankful that the students had chosen to attend school, unlike their similarly aged friends in the community who chose not to attend school.

If one of the stated goals of the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) was to encourage global thinking, ELAWS was relatively unsuccessful. The students dropped into the mainstream culture for four years, but on the whole they disliked learning about new ideas and diverse populations. Just as they had in 2005, when various conservative Mennonite groups started to integrate within the ELAWS program, by 2012, seven years later, the students were still self-selecting

377. Jeff Martin, interview

378. An EDSS teacher who was assigned to the ELAWS program as a senior English teacher chose to leave after one semester. He was discouraged by students who would often not speak or demonstrate interest in the curriculum. The teacher had Old Order Mennonite grandparents, and the principal had hoped that the young male teacher would be a positive addition to the teaching staff of ELAWS. The young man’s experience was similar to that of all ELAWS teachers. They had to learn to avoid Socratic questioning and adapt other teaching practices. The students were much more responsive in one-on-one interactions. The ELAWS staff learned to warn guest speakers not to leave time in their presentations for questions from the audience. Personal observation of author.

the days they attended, where they sat in class, and who they ate lunch with by gender and church group.

Tensions arose among the teachers regarding the responsibility and purpose of educating teenage girls.³⁷⁹ Many of the brightest and most conscientious students were girls, and yet within their communities they were actively discouraged from following any path to post-secondary education, for as one member of the parent council explained, “Lose a daughter, and lose a culture.”³⁸⁰ While this was inherently true, it was difficult for some staff, particularly the female teachers, to watch extremely competent students be directed to accept mundane jobs that rarely required a high school diploma.³⁸¹ There was some consolation for the staff that at least the girls at ELAWS had been allowed to attend secondary school, unlike the hundreds of other girls (and boys) in the region who were stopped or discouraged from going to school after age fourteen.

Encouraging the attendance and participation of girls in ELAWS and overcoming the bias, perceived or not, that it was less appropriate for girls to attend secondary school was a consistent challenge. It was accepted in the community that the Markham-Waterloo girls would not come to school.³⁸² With the Low German and the Midwest Fellowship, it appeared that if a family had made the decision to enrol in high school, they would allow both boys and girls to attend.³⁸³

379. Appendix E: Number of Students by Gender

380. Anonymous parent council member. Quote was given in Jeff Martin interview.

381. In 2008, Marlene Epp noted that “Girls were needed at home to help with household labour and the care of younger siblings, and as they were destined to become homemakers themselves, the informal educations provided by their mothers were considered to be more valuable than spending time at school.” Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 265.

382. In 1964 Leonard Gross studied the American census results of 1960 for Mennonites in North America. He added a sample of 1405 Mennonites from Ontario, which included a sampling of conservative Mennonites. With regard to chosen occupations 1.1 percent of public high school girls chose housewife, 4.1 percent of Mennonite High school girls chose housewife. Leonard Gross in “Mennonite Secondary and Higher Education: A report of the study conducted for the Study Commission on Mennonite Secondary and Higher Education,” Bender, December, 1964. 115. Among the conservative Mennonite female students in ELAWS in the years of this study, nearly all the girls would choose housewife as their occupation. Of the all the girls that graduated between 1996 and 2012, only six have attended college to pursue employment options. Most girls are employed outside of the home after graduation from grade twelve, but leave paid employment when they marry, or, at the latest, when they have children. Based on personal observation of author.

383. Based on personal observation of author.

The adaptations made to the ELAWS program to respond to various needs or demands were not always effective and sometimes hampered the delivery of the program. For example, despite adjusting the organization of the program to accommodate greater numbers, varying interests and preferences, facility constraints, existing expertise and resource availability, problems were identified within the ELAWS structure. Due to the extremely short academic week, students with learning challenges could not be accommodated very well, and the ability to address special education needs was extremely limited. Students who were bright and inquisitive were largely unchallenged by the applied-level courses used in the curriculum, and they had no options to take courses with more conceptual and theoretical content. For many Low German students, the issues that had led to the founding of ELAWS in 1996 still prevailed in 2012.

In 2011–2012, Sauder began a year-long project to research and build a model for an expanded Rural Education Services project. He came up with the name ULearn, which was derived from ‘You’ll Learn and You’ll Earn!’ The program was intended to appeal to the Low German parents because the students would not have to come to EDSS to participate. They would meet at Linwood Public School, and just as in the early days of ELAWS the students would complete ILC booklets at the essential level, which were the least difficult academically.

ULearn began officially in 2012 as an alternative to ELAWS for Low German students who wished to take secondary courses, but without the stated goal of attaining a high school diploma. By 2018 ULearn had seventy-eight students. This had implications for both programs as it over-taxed the ULearn teachers and diluted cultural diversity in ELAWS. In addition, it may have reduced the opportunity for some Low German students, who had an aptitude and interest, from accessing more challenging school work leading to more diverse and lucrative job opportunities such as in various skilled trades. Discussions were undertaken about merging certain aspects of ELAWS and ULearn,

particularly the co-op and workplace experiential learning opportunities, and in 2018 the staff of both programs began to share employment placements. In addition, in September 2018 ELAWS took the major step of changing its instructional days to Tuesday and Wednesday to allow for an exchange of teachers between the two programs. As was the case throughout the history of ELAWS, the program continued to evolve through collaboration between EDSS, the WRDSB and the community in responding to various needs and preferences within the conservative Mennonite community.

Education is a form of cultural preservation, and ELAWS honours the educational practices of the conservative Mennonites. Perhaps ELAWS, rather than being seen as an unaccepted outsider, impinging on an unchanging way of life, could be seen as a means of survival. Because ELAWS provides the education the government legislates, and offers access to the apprenticeships increasingly required by modern society, it allows students to stay in their rural communities and provide for themselves.

The research question of this thesis asked whether the conservative Mennonite understanding of public secondary education moved from rejection to acceptance, in the context of a growing relationship of trust between conservative Mennonites and a public school board. The answer to this question appears to be a qualified yes. The information gathered in this thesis, through interviews, observations, and a review of the related literature, indicates that the students, teachers, parents, community members and school board members had differing views of formal education when ELAWS first began in 1996.³⁸⁴ By 2012, at the conclusion of this study, the stakeholders could see the value in working together to sustain a public secondary school for conservative Mennonite students.

The ELAWS program is significant as one of the first educational programs in Canada to introduce both public schooling and secondary schooling to the conservative Mennonite

384. See Appendix D: Interview Scripts.

community.³⁸⁵ Through hard work, listening and compromising by the school system and the conservative Mennonite parents, the ELAWS program was able to accommodate all interested groups.

This thesis has shown that with the establishment of trust between the state and a religious minority, it is possible to create an educational opportunity that can accommodate diverse needs. Between 1996 and 2012, ELAWS brought a formal education, and the possibility of an OSSD, to conservative Mennonite students who had previously excluded themselves from the public secondary school.

Areas for Future Study

Studies could be done of other programs created to meet the needs of both a public school board and particular groups. For instance, a program parallel to ELAWS was established in 2006 in the Avon Maitland School Board. The CASE (Community-based Alternative Secondary Education) program in Perth County had the same religious groups as ELAWS in attendance, but included more Amish students and homeschoolers. It would be interesting to do a comparative study of ELAWS, CASE and the Center Peel High School in the Upper Grand School Board. They are still the only known public secondary school programs for a mixture of conservative Mennonites, in Canada, and perhaps the world.

The Markham-Waterloo have created their own high school program for boys only. Could the WRDSB offer a program for Markham-Waterloo girls only? It could be fascinating to develop a

385. While many ELAWS students completed grade ten courses in parochial schools before transferring to ELAWS in grade eleven, the grade nine and ten courses were offered in the same building as the elementary parochial school. The classes for grade nine and ten were often exceedingly small, with few students choosing to continue their formal education beyond grade eight. One student from a parochial school near Wellesley said there were three students in her combined grade nine/ten class. The teacher taught grade eight, and helped the senior students with bookwork when he had time. Personal observation of author.

gendered public secondary school for conservative Mennonites. This is an area for investigation that could be considered for integration in the ELAWS program or as an additional study.

Many of the findings related to the historical development of ELAWS could be considered and potentially applied to Indigenous education in Ontario. Could a program that successfully adapted its timetable and curriculum to meet the specific needs of a unique yet diverse cultural group be applicable to other diverse cultural groupings such as Indigenous students? Could features of the ELAWS program such as an effective parent council, carefully selected subject offerings based on the interests and preferences of the participants and a culturally conducive and sensitive learning environment have some positive impact on student engagement and the 41 percent dropout rate in Canada for off-reserve secondary school Indigenous students?³⁸⁶

The ELAWS model could be of use across Ontario for schools working with Muslim students. Jamila Akhtar Butt used oral history interviews to gather information, and quoted one parent who said:

Yes, my religion plays a very important role in the decisions I make about my involvement in my children's school. I believe I have a duty and responsibility to educate the school board about the values that define who we are as Muslims. The schools need to know what we consider ...the practices acceptable to Islam. The schools need to know about ...our dress code...prayers, health issues, physical education and recreation. When each of the practices mentioned are understood and put into practice in accordance with our belief, then our community will feel appreciated and valued as an equal partner in education.³⁸⁷

386. Alison Brown, "Number of Aboriginal Canadians Finishing High School is Up says Report," *Toronto Star*, April 30, 2014, https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/04/30/number_of_aboriginal_canadians_finishing_high_school_is_up_report_says.html

387. Jamila Akhtar Butt, "Building Sustainable Leadership for Inclusive School Communities: A Case of Muslim Parents," (master's thesis, University of Toronto, 2015), 63.

Butt goes on to give a practical example of how accommodations can be implemented when a school board and parents work together in her examination of a middle school with a large Muslim population. The school was 80 to 90 percent Muslim and located in an area of densely packed high rise apartments and highways. The school allowed for forty minutes of prayers in the cafeteria every Friday after lunch because, for the students' safety, neither the staff nor the parents want the students leaving the school to travel to a nearby mosque. Providing Muslim students with time and a place to pray in school makes good sense in such a setting.³⁸⁸ The demographic make-up of the school favours this decision and government policy allows this to happen.³⁸⁹

Butt's work, and the fact that Muslim students are enrolled in Ontario public secondary schools, suggests that public school boards could benefit in responding to meet the preferences and interest of some Muslim families by examining the ELAWS model. Rather than have individual schools struggle with implementing appropriate accommodations on an ad hoc basis, the ELAWS model could be used to address the needs of Muslim students with origins from around the world, including those newly arrived in the province, and those who have been in Ontario for years. A variety of language and cultural groups could be included and a strong parent council could be created.

Another potential area of study would be the application of the ELAWS model to rural education in Ontario. Many of the challenges faced and adaptations devised through the evolution of

388. The Board upholds the principles of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Constitution Act, 1982 and confirmed in the Ontario Human Rights Code (the 'Code'). The Board and its staff are also committed to the elimination of all types of discrimination as outlined in Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (the 'Strategy') and the Ontario Ministry of Education (the "Ministry") Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119. The Board recognizes that equity of opportunity and equity of access to the full range of programs, the delivery of services, and resources are critical to the achievement of successful educational and social outcomes for those served by the school system as well as those who serve the system.
https://www.dsb.org/uploadedFiles/DSBN_Policy/Human_Resources/Policy-E-11.pdf

389. Butt,103.

the ELAWS program may be applicable to the broader rural community. The need for children to work on family farms, the importance of learning skills from elders, and the value of carrying on traditions are critical for any community. The ELAWS model may offer some options to rural Ontario and elsewhere. In Ontario rural schools are on the decline, with a possible 121 schools closing in rural Southwestern Ontario between 2017 and 2020. An ELAWS style timetable with its flexibility and pragmatic support for students and rural operations may have something to offer.³⁹⁰ As students in small towns face longer and longer school bus rides each day, a shortened academic week with alternative or equivalent learning options might be attractive, healthy and helpful.

Finally, additional study could be undertaken on the ELAWS program and its continued evolution in the years after 2012. The largest number of students enrolled in ELAWS was 110 in 2012, and after that the numbers began to slightly decline. Further study could explore questions such as “Does declining enrolment after 2012 in ELAWS mean that that the conservative Mennonite communities turned away from accepting secondary public education?” or “How has the experience of ELAWS in their high school years affected the attitudes and practices of graduates from the ELAWS program as they consider the education of their children?”

Epilogue

In the years after 2012 ELAWS began to experience competition for students. In some cases, Mennonite groups moved from accepting public education back to suspecting its intent.

When the WRDSB closed Three Bridges in 2014, the Low German bought the building and re-named it the Old Colony Christian School. While the classes currently end at grade eight, there is talk of adding high school courses. Two of the teachers are current and former ELAWS students and none of the staff are provincially certified. Grade eight students from the school either finish at age

390. Mark Gollom, “How rural school closures are ’ripping the heart out of the community’”, Canadian Broadcast Corporation News, June 18, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/rural-school-closures-1.4157059>

fourteen or go on to the WRDSB ULearn program. The students are not monitored by the WRDSB, which is appealing to the parents.

The Markham-Waterloo initiated a high school program of their own in 2015, based closely on the timetable of ELAWS. The school is only for boys, and the teacher is unlicensed, so none of the students can earn an OSSD, but it is proving to be a popular option.³⁹¹ For ELAWS, the Markham-Waterloo School is an interesting development. It suggests that the Markham-Waterloo community now recognizes that their sons need some secondary education, but just as in their elementary parochial schools, they, and not the government of Ontario, will control their curriculum.³⁹² The creation of their own school is problematic for them. As long as they cannot offer an OSSD, they are in the same situation as they were in 2004. Their sons are not able to access licensed trades. Only three Markham-Waterloo girls are enrolled in ELAWS as of 2018. One is the daughter of Glen Lichty, the long-time supporter of the program. No other Markham-Waterloo girls have entered any type of secondary schooling.

The Midwest Fellowship purchased a former public school in Arthur, Ontario, and filled every classroom. They offer Kindergarten to grade ten classes. Some of their students then enter ELAWS to complete their high school diploma. Others stop at age sixteen. The Midwest Fellowship churches are growing, and many of their members are electing to leave public elementary schools in favour of their

391. Deborah Gorham wrote about the history of a private alternative school which was founded in Ottawa in the 1960s, from the point of view of a parent involved in founding the school. She noted, "Differing, though not necessarily conflicting goals often motivate individuals and groups of people who start schools. First, there are the concrete short-term goals: to provide a good atmosphere—for autonomy and freedom in the case of 'free schools'—for a specific group of children, teachers and parents." Gorham, "The Ottawa New School and Educational Dissent,"

392. In 2005, the same year that Markham-Waterloo Mennonites were entering ELAWS, Darrell Frey wrote a historical review of parochial education among the Markham-Waterloo Mennonites that included the number of private elementary schools they controlled. "Forty years ago the Mennonite Parochial School was only a hope and a dream for those who had concerns and ideals for their children. Today more than forty schools accommodating almost fourteen hundred students is a token of how we have been privileged by the vision of our fathers and grandfathers, and blessed by an almighty and merciful God." Darrell Frey, "The History of Mennonite Parochial Schools in Ontario," 3.

Was it coincidental that the series of articles regarding the benefits of private education was written the same year that ELAWS first gained Markham-Waterloo students?

parochial schools because of the public school sexual education curriculum, a LGBTQ-positive stance at the board of education, and a perceived lack of educational rigour. The Midwest Fellowship schools prefer a curriculum that emphasizes memorization and the recalling of facts over the public school curriculum that favours projects and group work.³⁹³ Like the Markham-Waterloo church members, many of the Midwest Fellowship would prefer to have their children schooled with other children from their own churches.

Some Midwest Fellowship families have chosen to stay at the private Countryside Christian School through grade twelve, rather than completing their education at ELAWS. Countryside always offered a five-day-a-week program that was appealing to the academically inclined. Now it offers a co-op option as well, and parents, including Tim Martin, are choosing to have their children remain there, rather than enter the public school system.³⁹⁴

In September of 2018 there will be more girls than boys enrolled in ELAWS, almost all from the Midwest Fellowship church group. This is an astounding change of demographics, as boys far outnumbered girls in the years of this thesis.³⁹⁵ When the Markham-Waterloo and Midwest Fellowship students first joined ELAWS in 2005, the stated purpose was to prepare boys to enter trades. As there are now more girls than boys in the program, will the entire focus change? Will ELAWS be adaptable enough to offer an enhanced curriculum that will appeal to girls who are not considering any further education? Should there be a female parent council? All of these questions remain to be answered.

Each of the three church groups in this study retreated from public elementary education in the years between 2012 and 2018. They either opened new parochial schools or added to existing systems. Is this the future for secondary schooling as well? Will each of the three groups decide they

393. Personal observation of author.

394. Tim Martin, interview.

395. See Appendix E Gender by Year.

prefer to have schools of their own, rather than integrate and co-operate with each other and a public school board? Will their desire for segregation within their own churches and cultures override any assumed benefits gained through the ELAWS program? It is difficult to predict the future, but we can look at the past. The evolution of ELAWS from 1996 to 2012 was punctuated by ebbs and flows in interest and engagement. However, it is clear that the conservative Mennonite community consisting of the Low German, the Markham-Waterloo, and the Midwest Fellowship were more involved with each other and public secondary education than in any previous time. The meaningful compromises, collaborative efforts and pragmatism demonstrated through the actions and thinking of all stakeholders, including the WRDSB, suggests that prior assumptions about public secondary school education had been rejected.

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Appendix A: Three Bridges SALEP Form



1872-

THREE BRIDGES PUBLIC SCHOOL

RR # 1, St. Jacobs
NOB 2N0
664-2931

Request to have your Child Remain at Home at Fourteen (14) Years of Age (SALEP)

SALEP is a short form for Supervised Alternative Learning for Excused Pupils.

Although most children are expected to attend school until 16 years of age we are able to have our young people continue their learning outside of the formal school setting at age 14. In our case the farm, shop or home would be examples of alternative learning settings.

For this to take place we need the attached form completed by you and returned to Three Bridges School within a few days. For those who wish to read it a copy of Regulation 532/83 it is kept on file at your school.

The request for a pupil to be excused should include the following information.

- a) specify what the program is that the student will be involved in
- b) explain briefly the reasons for this request.

In the section "The reasons for making this application are as follows": on the form attached, please fill in the information from the samples number 1 or 2 below unless you wish to make up your own wording.

1. In keeping with personal and religious beliefs, I request that my son, (name) be permitted to continue his education by helping on the home farm, or on that of others in our community as needed. He will be supervised by his father and taught the skills necessary to work on a farm.
2. In keeping with personal and religious beliefs, I request that my daughter, (name) be permitted to continue her education by helping in our home, or in the homes of others in our community as needed. She will be supervised by her mother and taught the skills necessary to work as a homemaker.

I trust this will help explain the process, expectations and give you some assistance with completing the form.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J. Lepold".

J. Lepold



The Waterloo County Board of Education

Appendix B: Farm Harvest Leave Form

D-APP.6

LETTERHEAD OF RESPECTIVE SCHOOL

(IN ENGLISH)

Dear Parent:

Each September parents must obtain a Farm Harvest Leave from their school before allowing their children to work. This permit will be issued only when you register your children on the first day of school in September. Allowing children to work without a permit may result in charges being laid against you in Family Court.

If you wish to know if your children will qualify for Farm harvest Leave in September you may contact your principal now. The school will provide you with a letter explaining whether your children will or will not be granted permission to work. Employers may want to see such a letter before hiring you and your family for the season. You must still register your children and apply for a permit on the first day of school in September.

the principal may issue a permit:

- only in September when the children have been registered
- only if you attend the school to sign the application
- only for children 10 years of age or older
- only if the children had good attendance and good achievement in previous years
- only for the first 15 school days

NOTE: THERE WILL BE NO LEAVES PERMITTED FOR SPRING PLANTING OR PICKING.

The principal will cancel the permit:

- if any other children in the family under 10 years of age or without permits are not in regular attendance
- if all children are not in school on rainy days
- if he/she learns that the children are not employed in the harvest

Charges may be laid:

- if parents do not apply for permission but allow their children to work
- if parents are denied permission but allow their children to work.
- if the permit is cancelled but parents allow their children to continue to miss school
- if the permit expires and parents do not return their children to school

This policy was established in an effort to meet the needs of the growers, the family, the schools and most important, the pupils. Your cooperation and understanding are very much appreciated. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact your school principal.

Sincerely,

Form was also available in Low German. Used with permission of Charlanne Russell.

Appendix C: Ontario Mennonite Theological Typology

Theological Orientation

Old Order (OO)

Example

Old Order Mennonite, Old Order Amish

Brief Description

Highly separatist in technology and dress, submission to community, non-evangelical.

Theological Orientation

Separatist Conservative (SC)

Example

Old Colony, Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario

Brief Description

Evangelical, but retain separation in dress and use of some media technologies.
Fundamentalist, but emphasize Mennonite doctrine, including nonresistance.

Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands*, 474.

Appendix D: Interview Scripts

Interview Script for Students

1. When and for how long did you attend ELAWS?
2. Why did you decide to attend ELAWS?
3. What were your concerns about attending ELAWS and being in a secondary school?
4. Why did your parents allow you to attend?
5. How did the school staff work with you? (Or not?)
6. What are your memories of the interaction between you and the other students?
7. What did you feel and how do you feel now about attending secondary school?
8. Do you think that ELAWS met your needs? Why or Why not?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience with ELAWS?

Interview Script for Parents

1. Did all of our children attend ELAWS?
2. How did you decide which children would attend?
3. In what years were your children involved in ELAWS?
4. What were your concerns about secondary education?
5. Why did you allow your children to attend?
6. How did the school staff work with you? (Or not?)
7. What are your memories of the interaction between the school and the parents?
8. What are your memories of the reaction of your children to secondary schooling?
9. Do you think that ELAWS met a need within the community? Why or Why not?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience with ELAWS?

Interview Script for Use with Current and Former Staff of the WRDSB

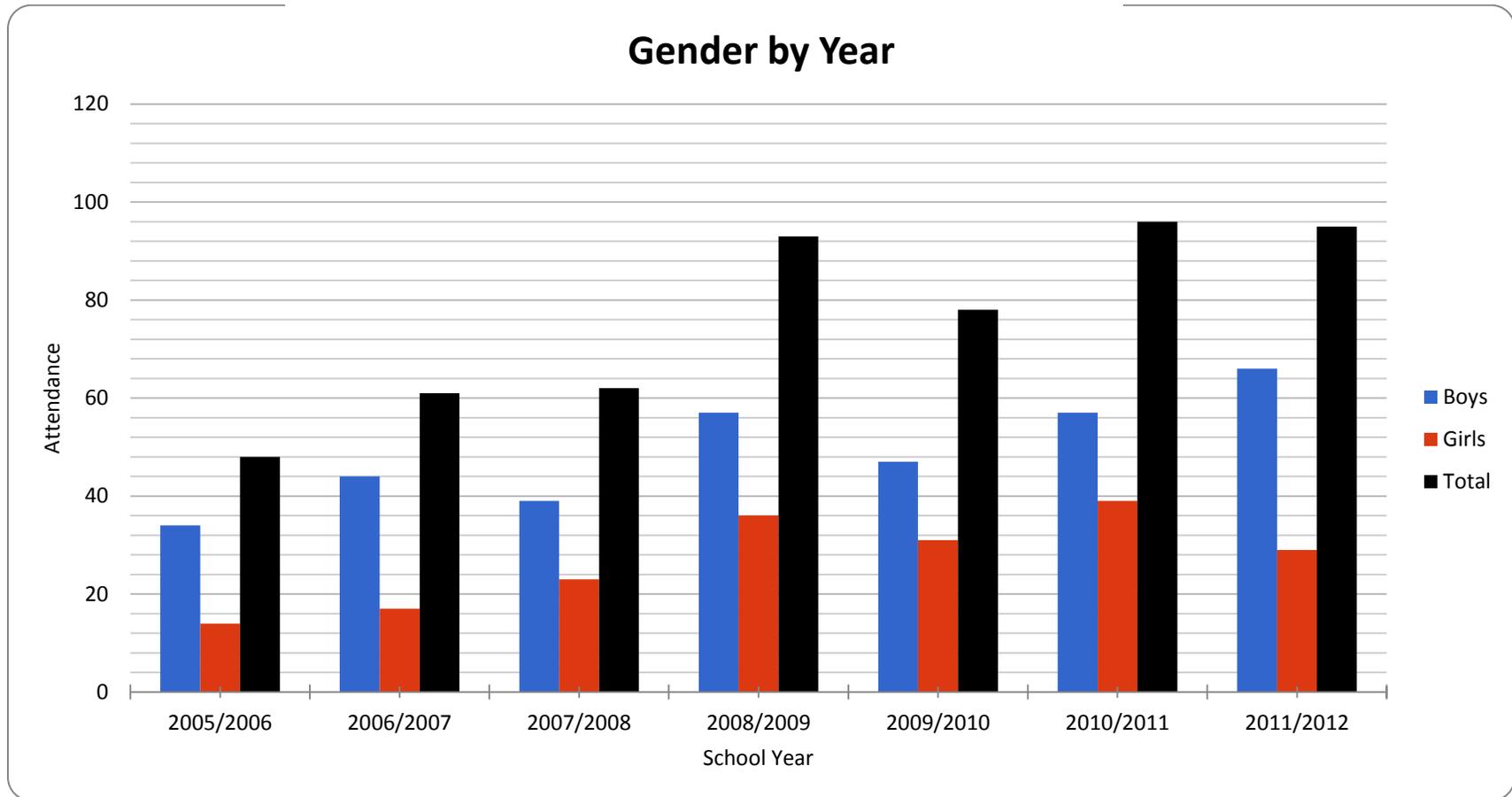
1. How did you see ELAWS? Was it a Mennonite-only program, a Christian program in a public school, or an outreach program for marginalized youth?
2. Why do you think ELAWS was founded?
3. What was your initial contact with the program?
4. What was your role at ELAWS?
5. What years were you with ELAWS?
6. Who did you work with to develop the program?
7. How many staff did you work with?
8. Where did the ELAWS program meet?
9. How many students were attached to ELAWS at that time?
10. What were the major questions facing you during your time with ELAWS?
11. How did you try to solve these questions?
12. What was the relationship between ELAWS and EDSS at that time?
13. What relationship did you need to create with the community?
14. How did you create this relationship?
15. How did you find the students to attend ELAWS?
16. How did you work with the church groups to have them agree to attend school together?
17. What were the strengths of the program in your years? What were the weaknesses of the program?
18. What factors were most critical in keeping the program growing in your years?
19. Is there anything else you would like to share about ELAWS?

Additional Clarifying Questions for use with All Interviewees, as appropriate

1. How did ELAWS meet your/your child's/the student's interests, needs and preferences?
2. How did ELAWS honour your/your child's/the student's beliefs and values while also providing access to the skills and knowledge required to complete the course?
3. How did adjustment to the ELAWS schedule help (or not) with your/your child's/the student's working schedule and requirements around the household?
4. If you/your child/the student earned a diploma, how did ELAWS help you/your child/the student in pursuing an apprenticeship or other requirements for you/your child/the student work? If you/your child/the student did not earn a diploma, did this hamper you/your child/the student in pursuing the skills or any requirements you/your child/the student needed for work?
5. How did ELAWS help (or not) in easing you/your parents/the student's parents concern about you being involved in secondary school?
6. How did ELAWS help (or not) in encouraging enrolment of girls and meeting the needs of girls for a secondary education.
7. How was ELAWS beneficial (or not) to your/your child's/the student's family and community?
8. Where appropriate: How did changes in ELAWS between 1996 and 2012 contribute to it being a successful or worthwhile program for you/your child/the student. What were the successes that resulted from the changes to the program?
9. Was ELAWS challenging and helpful to you/your child/the students in learning skills, attending, and being engaged? Why or why not?
10. How would you judge the success of a program like ELAWS?
11. What role did the parent council play in ELAWS? How (or not) did it contribute to improving the program?
12. What do you think your experience with ELAWS means for other students/other families/ when it comes to continued participation in secondary education?
13. Is there anything else about your experience with the ELAWS program that you would like to share?

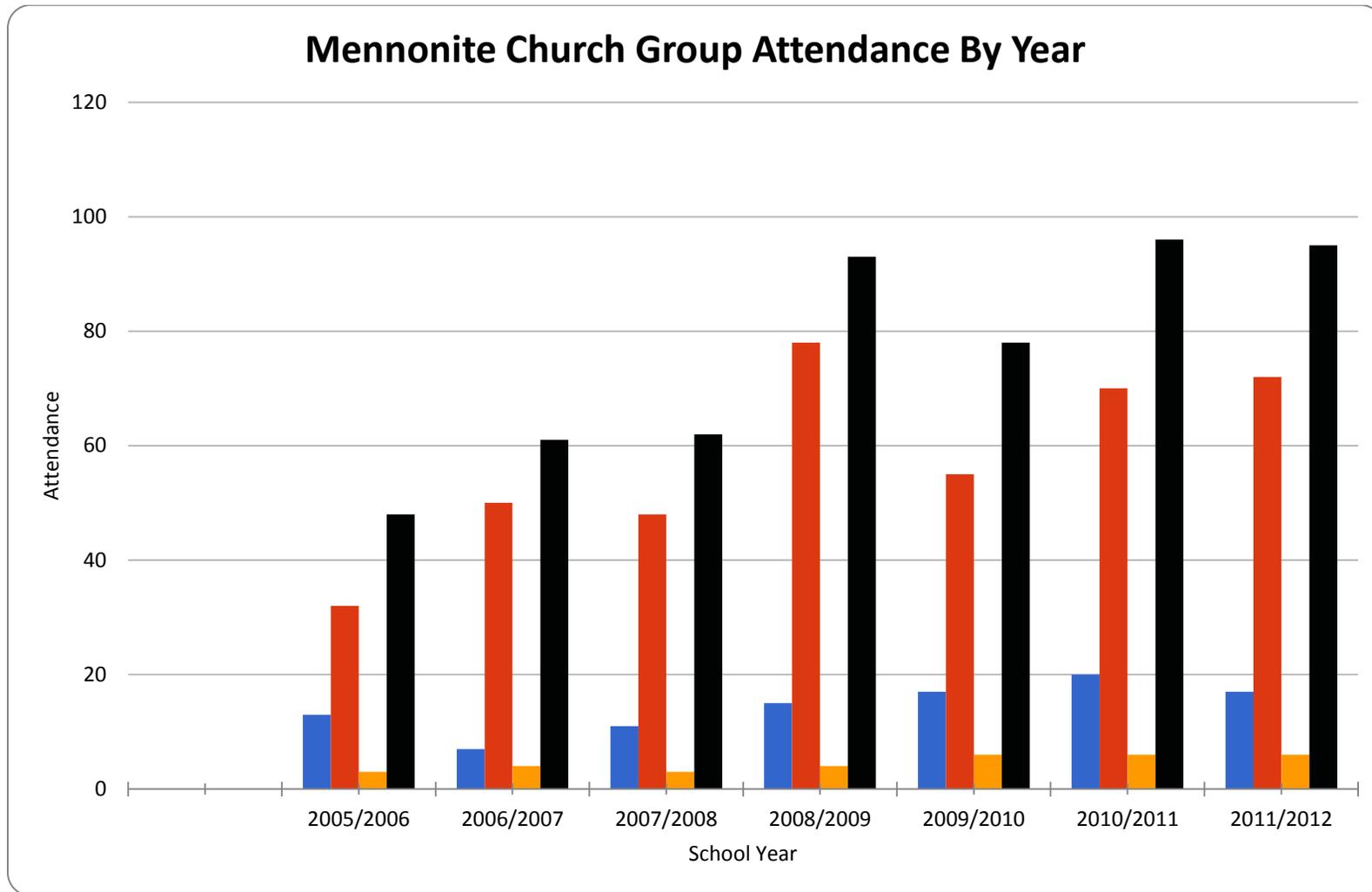
Approved by the Office of Research Ethics, University of Waterloo, October 2016.

Appendix E: Number of Students by Gender



Statistics used with permission of EDSS, 2018.

Appendix F: Number of Students by Church



Statistics used with permission of EDSS, 2018