



The Story of HOPE

The story of HOPE is really a story of God working through people. It's the story of unlocking potential in God's children and inspiring a sense of purpose that brings lasting change to lives, families and communities. And it all started with a walk through a Milwaukee neighborhood.

James Rahn is one of several founding visionaries and the current board chair for HOPE Christian Schools. In the fall of 1999, James was walking through an urban neighborhood where the local faith-based school had been closed down because, as he had been told, there were "not enough children here to have a school." As he walked the streets, James recalls having to dodge strollers and children running about. And as he approached the school building that had been closed by the local church, he saw lights on and people milling around inside. He saw students, teachers and what looked like a school day in session. He stopped inside to learn what was happening in this school he thought had been closed. He found out that a nearby charter school had run out of room for its rapidly expanding school because there were "so many children to serve in this neighborhood." This charter school was renting the space that had been vacated by the church.

This all took place right after the Wisconsin Supreme Court had passed a ruling allowing low-income children in Milwaukee to utilize a state voucher to pay for their tuition to attend any school of their choice, including faith-based schools. Immediately Jim's mind began to race, and he began wondering how we as people of faith could do more to serve urban children by providing them with excellent educational opportunities.

Quickly and with a sense of urgency, James and a growing group of Christians began working on a new vision: To create a network of schools that offered rigorous academics, character formation, and faith formation accessible to the families qualifying for vouchers. Milwaukee would be the starting point for a model that could be replicated in other locations across the country.

This was the beginning of the journey for HOPE Christian Schools. While we have been blessed with incredible serving leaders with extraordinary talent, vision, and the hearts of tireless soldiers for this cause, the story of HOPE is really the story of God working through His people to maximize the potential in His children for Greater Purpose. It's the story of unlocking potential in God's children and inspiring a sense of purpose that brings lasting change to lives, families and communities. And, it's the story of Christians simply doing what God has called us to do: love one another, serve one another, and do it all with excellence befitting Christ whose name we bear.

Today, HOPE Christian Schools is a network of private Christian college-preparatory schools serving nearly 3,000 scholars in Milwaukee and Racine, Wisconsin. The six HOPE schools in Milwaukee participate in the Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program, and our two schools in Racine are part of the Racine Parental Choice Program. Nearly 100 percent of our scholars qualify for free or reduced lunch and live in some of the most impoverished areas of these two urban centers. In spite of the statistical odds being stacked against them, our scholars are proving what is possible. For the seventh year in a row, 100 percent of our high school seniors were accepted into college. Our elementary scholars are demonstrating strong academic results as well, growing faster than their peers as

demonstrated on the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP), a nationally normed growth assessment.

All of this began with the passion, energy and inspiration of HOPE’s founders who had hearts for service and a love for children who they saw not as statistics, but rather as God’s own children, created on purpose and for great purpose. And none of this could have happened, or indeed can continue, without God’s ongoing grace and blessing at every step along the journey. As we look back on 17 years of the growth and development of HOPE Christian Schools, it is clear that God put the talented people, the courageous leaders and groundbreaking public policies in place at key moments in time to bring HOPE to life, sustain it and grow it.

HOPE is an acronym that stands for “Holding Onto the Promises Everywhere.” The formation of this acronym was one step of many along the way as HOPE has evolved and developed more clarity in its communication. The culture of HOPE Christian Schools from the very beginning has been continuous improvement with an entrepreneurial mindset, always refining and finding better ways to accomplish our mission. HOPE’s mission has included the same three pillars since the beginning: 1) deliver excellent academics, 2) create the opportunity for strong character formation, and 3) share Christ with our scholars to support them in building an ongoing, deepening relationship with Him. The founders also envisioned that each of these three pillars should be delivered in a way that is *sustainable* for our people and those we serve, as well as *scalable*, so as to open up more opportunities to serve more children. This three-fold mission has been refined and is now simply stated by our team as “**Christ. College. Character.**® for all.”

HOPE Christian Schools in Wisconsin

School	Latin Name Meaning
HOPE Prima, Milwaukee, WI	First
HOPE High School, Milwaukee, WI	-
HOPE Fortis, Milwaukee, WI	Strong
HOPE Semper, Milwaukee, WI	Always
HOPE Caritas, Milwaukee, WI	Caring
HOPE Via, Racine, WI	Way
HOPE Fidelis, Milwaukee, WI	Faithful
HOPE Veritas, Racine, WI	Truth

“The Game Changer”

At the time of HOPE’s inception, Milwaukee had the largest achievement gap in the nation between black and white students. Fewer than 60 percent of high school freshmen actually graduated.

Some saw these as statistics. In reality, these were God’s children, created with unique talents and gifts to accomplish great purpose in their lives. The brokenness of the system was preventing thousands of children from realizing their full potential in school and in life.

Along came the “game changer:” The Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program. This pilot voucher program began with seven secular schools and enrolled about 300 students in its first year, 1990. In 1995, the enrollment cap was raised from 1,500 students to 15 percent of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) enrollment. Also for the first time, private, faith-based schools were allowed to participate. Shortly after, though, this provision was challenged in court and religious schools were prevented from participating until 1998, when the Wisconsin Supreme Court overturned the lower court’s decision.

James Rahn remembers where he was the day the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued its decision. June 10, 1998: James was sipping an orange drink during the morning break at a convention of pastors and educators in Milwaukee when a colleague casually mentioned that the court had just announced its decision.

For James, it was as if the ground had just shifted for education in Milwaukee. This court decision reverted back to an older definition of “public education,” where “education for the public” could be publicly funded but privately run. The introduction of “choice” gave parents true ownership and autonomy over their child’s education. If a faith-based education was important to their family, financial means was no longer a barrier for low income families in Milwaukee. Suddenly, in addition to their public school district option, families could choose from among private and faith-based schools as well.

What would the Christian churches’ response be to this great shift in public policy? There was a myriad of questions and issues for congregations to navigate: What strings came attached to government dollars? What would happen to the culture of the current schools with an influx of students who were not congregational members? Could their existing staff handle such changes?

As various congregations debated and planned their next steps, a committee of entrepreneurial Christians, including Rahn, continued to think boldly. They were led to the idea of creating a private Christian school in the central city, not tied to one particular congregation, funded by vouchers. Four major priorities guided their thinking: 1) Offer a Christ-centered education, 2) Focus on academic excellence, 3) Maintain financial discipline that would enable growth and sustainability, and 4) Make the model scalable so that more children could be served. This was truly a marriage between Gospel-motivated Christian love for all children and entrepreneurial thinking. God had raised up the right group of leaders for the time.

By early 2000, this committee had raised enough start-up funds to continue its work and hire a part-time staff member who could be the face of this idea for a Christian voucher school. Tim McNeill was serving as principal at Siloah Lutheran School and took on the role. He spent much of his time hosting and attending community meetings, presenting the idea of a Christian school in the Metcalf Park neighborhood.

At one such meeting, Tim recalls the adamant opinion of one community resident who said, “You don’t want to come here. This is Satan’s back yard.” Indeed, community members believed this to be true: The area was notorious for its drug houses and crime. Tim recalls looking around the room in that moment, and seeing loving, kind people living with pain.

At that moment, Tim says he steeled himself much like a Marine might do before setting out to take the next hill. He became determined to walk shoulder-to-shoulder with the community and use this new “game changer” to create educational options for families, providing new hope and freedom in a community that was feeling trapped. That is when the committee decided to name the school “Hope.”

The Hope Christian School organization was founded, bringing a new level of credibility to the idea.* The community relations work continued until, by the grace of God, HOPE secured a building and the proper zoning for a school on 25th Street in Milwaukee. Tim McNeill worked day and night to enroll students, gather supplies and hire the first teachers. He was a uniquely driven servant for HOPE’s early days – motivated by a deep love for God’s children and for the people of the community.

* Hope’s name was later changed to its current acronym expressed in capital letters to distinguish it from other Christian organizations with the same name.

HOPE Christian Schools History At-a-Glance

1998	Wisconsin Supreme Court issues decision that private, faith-based schools can participate in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, making vouchers available for qualifying families who desire a faith-based education for their children.
2000	The HOPE organization is founded.
2002	HOPE opens a school in Milwaukee's Amani neighborhood with 47 scholars in grades K-4. That campus is known today as HOPE Christian School: Prima.
2003	HOPE Christian School expands to serve 130 scholars in grades K-6.
2004	HOPE opens a high school in Milwaukee's Harambee neighborhood with 108 freshman students. HOPE Christian School expands to serve 189 students in grades K-7.
2005	HOPE opens a middle school in Milwaukee's Riverwest neighborhood with 76 students in grades 5-8. Today, that school is called HOPE Christian School: Fortis. HOPE Christian School: Prima expands to serve 247 students in grades K-8. HOPE High School expands to serve 233 freshman and sophomore students. Total enrollment in HOPE's three schools reaches more than 500.
2009	HOPE Christian School: Fortis moves to a new location (Port Washington and Keefe) and expands to a full K4-8 school, starting with K4-2 and 6-8. HOPE's three schools serve more than 600 students and their families.
2011	Due to parent demand, HOPE Christian School: Prima doubles in size and serves nearly 500 scholars.
2012	HOPE Christian School: Semper opens with grades K4-4. HOPE High School celebrates its first year of 100% college acceptance. HOPE's four schools serve more than 1,200 scholars and their families.
2014	HOPE Christian School: Caritas opens with grades K5-4. HOPE's five schools serve more than 1,600 scholars and their families.
2015	HOPE Via opens and enrolls students in Racine for the 2015-16 school year, K4-3 with plans to gradually expand to serve K4-8. HOPE Christian Schools serve nearly 2,000 scholars and their families in Milwaukee and Racine.
2016	HOPE Christian School: Fidelis opens at full capacity with a waiting list, serving the neighborhood around Teutonia and Silver Spring. HOPE Christian High School celebrates five consecutive years of 100% college acceptance. HOPE's seven schools serve nearly 2,500 scholars and their families in Milwaukee and Racine.
2017	HOPE Christian School: Veritas incubates within HOPE Via, with plans to serve Racine's south side.

Sustainable and scalable

The HOPE board of directors began to see a vast mission opportunity and envisioned a scalable network of schools that would provide more high-quality educational opportunities to more children. By the second year of operations, HOPE was in search of more great people to support the idea of an independent Christian voucher school network.

In 2004, Kole Knueppel came to HOPE as Superintendent, charged with developing a team that would open a high school and a middle school to round out a HOPE K-12 education. By 2005, the HOPE network had three schools serving nearly 500 scholars. Kole focused on building a team of passionate serving leaders and a culture of being “solution finders.” He also led efforts to collect and implement best practices from other nationally respected, high-performing schools. During this timeframe, a new leadership structure was put into place that still exists today and allows for the implementation of best practices. School leadership roles were split between the Principal (instructional leader), the Director of Operations (business and operations leader), and the Dean of Students (culture and behavioral intervention leader). The goal was to hire leaders with passion for each particular role, thereby freeing each of them to do what they do best.

After the grueling startup years, HOPE’s formative years from about 2007 through 2011 were all about creating great school culture. Jamie Luehring, HOPE Prima principal from 2007-2012, focused on setting expectations and following through on them. He recalls the first day of school in 2007, when 70 of 200 scholars came to school without proper uniforms. “There were challenges to creating the culture,” he says. “At first it seemed like a lot of rules. It took two full years to build trust that this culture was good for the scholars.”

Jamie also focused on shaping the HOPE Prima staff. High expectations are not just for scholars – it starts with adults. Staff training focused on shifting to the positive, with practices such as “Five positive statements for every one correction.” Jamie recalls reading many business leadership books with the staff, all the while encouraging and instilling a sense that *we can do this*.

Despite the staff development emphasis, HOPE leaders like Luehring were concerned about burnout. This led to an intentional shift aimed at sustainability: Help teachers keep the stamina to stay in the teaching profession longer. The focus became “Time on Task” with emphasis, “On Task.” There was a limit to the amount of time that was truly productive, both for students and for the staff, and after that amount of time there would be diminishing returns. This belief led to shortened school days (although they were still longer than an average school day or school year in the public school system) and focusing on the essentials that supported our three pillars of academics, character formation and faith formation.

In the summer of 2008, the HOPE board of directors had a key decision to make. A substantial investment in staff training was needed to take our quality to the next level. We had spent considerable time touring some of the nation’s strongest schools, consolidating their best practices, and building out summer training sessions for our team, with the intent to grow our ability to replicate these models in our own classrooms. However, we needed the board’s permission to allow us to reduce the amount of time focused on canvassing that summer in order to create more time for summer professional development. We knew this created the risk of missing our enrollment targets and potentially causing financial losses adding up to more than \$200,000.

Here is where the leadership of our founding visionaries came into play. It had been a priority from the beginning to *maintain financial discipline that would enable growth and sustainability*. The board’s fiscal discipline now played a critical role in enabling us to make this key strategic decision. We could afford a financial loss for a year, and we felt this was a key moment to make a major investment in our quality.

We did take a major financial hit that year. However, God ultimately blessed the decision. Academic performance grew, teacher retention grew, and within two years HOPE began a steady growth curve that took us from 500 scholars then to now 2,000 scholars in the seven years since that summer.

HOPE also began to garner attention from other education reform leaders around the country. Samuel Casey Carter and his team of researchers examined close to 3,500 schools over the course of a year and selected 12 to be featured in their book, *On Purpose: How Great School Cultures Form Strong Character*. Carter took notice of instructional norms such as “five positive comments for every one that corrects” and the scholars’ discipline around using polite and positive language. Carter’s most poignant praise, however, zeroes in on what makes HOPE unique among schools: Christian love. While Christians do not hold a monopoly on loving actions, we do have the most compelling reason and model for unconditional love: Christ’s self-sacrifice. Carter writes, “Maybe the greatest lesson coming out of HOPE is that the willingness to love is also a habit that a community can learn and cultivate.”

Carter’s observation reminds us that Christian love stands out from the norm and gets noticed. “See how they love one another,” Tertullian wrote of the early Christian church. Getting noticed is God’s intention – not for our glory or reward, but for His. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Christian love is God’s powerful tool for making himself known, and for blessing individuals, families, communities, and the nation. This value, “love,” has become one of our five primary values as an organization and is a key driver of every aspect of our culture. With such a free and powerful tool at hand, HOPE Christian Schools can confidently build on our three pillars of purpose: excellent academics, character formation, and fostering an environment that makes Christian education an affordable and accessible choice for all families who desire it.

The pursuit of academic excellence

God puts people in different roles at different times. For Tim, Kole and Jamie, the fuel that got them through the challenges of the start-up was that HOPE brought Jesus to children who needed Jesus. The next phase at HOPE was to make key advancements in the pursuit of academic excellence. This produced deep conversations around our responsibility as Christian educators: Is our number one priority to share Jesus? Or is it academic excellence? Once again, with our Savior’s life as our model, the answer is clearly, “Yes” to both questions.

We know that Jesus did His work with excellence. When Jesus turned water into wine, it was unarguably the most excellent wine (John 2:10). The feeding of the 5,000 wasn’t merely a snack; it was a filling feast with leftovers (John 6:12-13). The lame man rolled up his mat and walked out in full view of everyone after Jesus healed him (Mark 2:12), and we doubt he had a limp! In his brief three years of ministry on this earth, Jesus turned heads with His work, and set the bar high for those who follow in his footsteps.

If this is how Jesus did his work, with absolute excellence, what does that require of us as Christian educators -- especially if we are willing to wear His name as HOPE “Christian” Schools? Clearly, it requires we pursue excellence in all aspects of our work. Ultimately, for us it boils down to one simple question: “*What type of education would Jesus want for His own children?*” Because that is exactly who we are serving.

We find our answer to this question in the Bible:

- He would want His children to know their identity as children of God (1 John 3:1)
- He would want His children to know the purpose for which they were created (Ephesians 2:10)
- He would want them to perform as if working for the Lord (Colossians 3:23)

Essentially, Jesus would want His children to be growing in a relationship with Him and continually expanding their potential to accomplish the good works they were created to do.

Driven by our desire to continually improve and pursue excellence in all we do, we endeavored to “take the next hill” – advancing our academics by aligning to key standards and embracing data-driven instruction. HOPE High School moved from Terra Nova testing to the ACT College Readiness Series, which we believed would provide better data to guide teaching and planning. Meanwhile, leaders at HOPE Prima and HOPE Fortis saw the continuing growth of the high school’s academics and knew that similar steps were needed at the K-8 level. The K-8 schools soon implemented the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP). These assessments enabled the development and implementation of standards-based teaching informed by strong data.

Over time we have built more and more consistencies across our schools in both our culture and our academic models. This has enabled us to do a better job of releasing the power of the network as our team was aligned and working on common frameworks together.

A significant example of a common framework is the scorecard for schools that we use to monitor our ongoing performance and make continual improvements. This scorecard sets goals and targets for each functional area of the school. The scorecard says “this is what ‘good’ looks like” and allows us to stack schools beside one another, highlighting breakthrough results and facilitating the sharing of best practices across the organization. Singing from the same hymnal produces beautiful harmony.

Getting intentional about character

We’ve described the unique role of HOPE as a conduit to both “Christ” and “College” – two of our “3 Cs.” The third “C” in HOPE’s threefold focus is “Character.” For an education to have lifelong, lasting impact, any efforts to achieve great academic performance must be inspired by internally driven character.

As we evaluated how to more intentionally integrate character development into HOPE’s culture and educational programming, we strived to better understand how character is formed, and where it is held for lasting impact. We gathered a team of veteran educators who researched existing character development literature and curriculum in an effort to understand how character is acquired and held. This team’s work became known as the Character Formation Project, and its content and programming is being fully integrated into HOPE’s curriculum as well as embedded into the culture and all aspects of HOPE Christian Schools.

The groundbreaking work of this team is the discovery of a natural process for the formation of *internally* driven character rather than externally motivated character. The internally motivated child possesses the wisdom, moral compass and internal drive to make good decisions and pursue greater purpose regardless of time and circumstance. Discovering the process and creating the content to support the character formation journey of scholars and staff has been critical to solidifying the character development pillar at HOPE Christian Schools.

Because we are a private Christian school, scholars and staff at HOPE have the blessing of being able to form character in a Christian context. Within that context, Christian character formation focuses on our **identity** as redeemed children of God (1 John 3:1). It then reflects on **purpose** - the unique opportunities we have to make God known by glorifying Him through our work in light of Biblical hope (Ephesians 2:10). Finally, the Christian character formation process focuses on **actions** by reflecting God’s love in the way we live, summarized in our character formation programming through the study of seven key virtues.

With this process, virtue is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to fulfill a purpose greater than oneself. HOPE scholars who come to understand their identity and purpose in Christ have the internal capacity to evaluate and motivate their own performance. It is one of the most empowering tools we can give a child.

Climbing the next hill

The story of HOPE is the story of God's people working to build this model of an excellent education for all children, beginning with those who are trapped in low-performing schools, with little or no understanding of their identity and value in Christ or sense of God's greater plan for their lives. The hard work of HOPE's serving leaders – past and present – has provided **Christ.College.Character.**[®] to thousands of children in Wisconsin, and we can celebrate this success.

After a brief pause for praise to our God who makes all things possible, we look ahead to the next hill that must be climbed. We see several key opportunities.

First, as a network of schools, we have a huge opportunity to harvest the best practices that emerge in each school. This is a distinct advantage we can develop as we cultivate the power of our network of talented, passionate and mission-aligned team members.

Next, we feel the responsibility to spur the church into action around advancing educational opportunities for children across our country. HOPE is one small drop in a very big bucket, but can serve as a proof point that Christians can and should play a key role in ensuring every child in our country has access to an excellent education. HOPE can serve as an example of what can happen when Christians are motivated by Christ's love *and* think like entrepreneurs. A key to our success has been shedding any preservationist tendencies and moving forward with bold, strategic and entrepreneurial thinking.

As an example, in 2008, the board of HOPE Christian Schools surveyed the educational landscape in search of other innovative ways to lead educational reform and deliver the three pillars of excellent academics, character formation and faith formation to more children. As a result, Educational Enterprises, Inc. (EEI) was formed, a separate and supporting entity allowing for a broader approach to serving children. In addition to managing and growing the network of HOPE Christian Schools, EEI created a network of public charter schools (EAGLE College Preparatory Schools), each with an optional Christian preschool and wraparound day care services (Compass Educational Programs). And most recently, EEI launched the Character Formation Project, a licensed set of character formation content and programming with two versions -- one for public schools based on civic character, and the other for Christian education based on Christian character. Each of these entities plays a role in delivering one or more of the three pillars to upwards of 6,000 children and families as of today, and the impact is growing.

To more clearly communicate optimism for the future of education and to prepare for opportunities on the horizon, EEI changed its name to [Open Sky Education](#) in 2016. Open Sky Education remains an entrepreneurial, not-for-profit organization in tireless pursuit of a full and lasting education for all children.

What started with a single individual taking a simple walk through an urban neighborhood has grown into a passionate team of educators serving thousands of children, striving daily to humbly reflect the heart of Jesus and serving His children in all we do. While we are grateful for the accomplishments of the past and the blessings we receive daily as we serve Him, we are continually driven forward by the sobering fact that the educational system in our country today is still allowing millions of children to slip through the cracks -- not fully developing their sense of identity and purpose, nor being prepared to achieve their full potential to serve the greater purpose for which they have been created. As a nation,

we have a long way to go to ensure all children have access to an excellent education, maximizing their full potential for greater purpose.

We are hopeful that HOPE can be one small part of a much larger movement of people of faith across our country who will utilize the resources and opportunities God has given them in new and innovative ways to serve our nation's children. Let's work together in innovative ways that reflect the urgency and passion of the heart of our Leader, Christ.

We're in the process of compiling HOPE's rich history from the perspective of those who lived it. The story of HOPE includes many contributors, and we don't want to miss anyone! If you have a story to add, please contact [Fatima Wakefield](mailto:fatima.wakefield@hopeschools.org) at fatima.wakefield@hopeschools.org.

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