Granting recognition to people highly supportive of Lutheran education is a way for the ELEA to honor outstanding accomplishment. Toward this goal, ELEA established The Donald A. Vetter Educational Service Award in 2004. It is designed to identify persons who have made extraordinary achievements and contributions distinguished by long-standing commitment to the values of ELEA. The award may be granted annually to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to Lutheran education consistent with Dr. Vetter's own career. The recipient will be deemed a worthy model for those committed to exemplary service in Lutheran education. The award is intended to draw attention to the value of Lutheran schools and early childhood education centers, to identify high standards of excellence, and to inspire others to ministry in such a setting. [No award will be made to any person currently holding an office on the ELEA National Board or paid position in ELEA.]

Words from the citation for Dr. Vetter's L.L.D. degree provide a benchmark for the award: “He has been the one person most responsible for the quality, promotion, and development of the Christian Day Schools and Preschools within the church.” He displays “...a great love for his Lord, and his family; and a personal warmth and spirit easily overlooked in his humble supportiveness of others.”

Donald A. Vetter (1919-2002) devoted his adult life to the ministry of Lutheran schools. His own education began in Fort Wayne, IN at his parish’s Lutheran elementary school. He later received a bachelor’s degree from Capital University (an ELCA institution of higher education in Columbus, Ohio) and eventually an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California. He served as teacher/principal/organist to Trinity Lutheran Church and School, Marysville, Ohio; Zion Lutheran Church and School in Appleton, Wisconsin; and First Lutheran Church and School in Blue Island, Illinois. Dr. Vetter had the foresight to see the need for a national organization to represent the needs and values of Lutheran schools while administrator at First Lutheran in Blue Island. He was instrumental in establishing the American Lutheran Education Association (ALEA), the predecessor of ELEA. He served as the founding Executive Director of the organization. His office was based at Wartburg College where he held a faculty appointment and developed a program of teacher preparation for Lutheran school educators.

The ELEA National Board is seeking nominations for the 16th annual Donald A. Vetter Educational Service Award. One nomination may be made from each of the 9 ELEA Regions. Nominations should be submitted to the ELEA National Office by July 15th of each year and should include:

- Name, contact information and current professional assignment of Nominee
- Name and contact information of Nominator(s)
- Biographical summary of Nominee
- A statement of no more than one page of why the nominee should be awarded the Vetter Award prepared by the Nominator(s)
- Relationship of Nominator(s) to Nominee (i.e. former student, colleague, etc.)
- Letters of support of nomination are encouraged and will weigh heavily in the decision

The award will be presented to the recipient at the ELEA National Administrator & Pastor Conference.