

**SAINT MARY SCHOOL—RIDGEFIELD CONNECTICUT  
A BLUE RIBBON NOMINATED SCHOOL**

*Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam! Mens Sano in Corpore Sano!*

**The Mission:** A unique accredited school with a vibrant life of its own Saint Mary School reaches out to all students pre-k to 8. The mission is clear: to honor God through the spiritual, academic, and physical development of the truly educated person. And that mission applies to *all*, from the students, to the teachers, to the parents, to the administrative assistants to the clergy, to the custodians and to the principal. Teachers are empowered to carry out the mission. It is a true “spiritual community of learners.”

**The Spiritual:** Our Catholic faith feeds each individual journey. It is in that spirit that the school has developed an environment of mutual respect and caring. It is in the spirit of Christ, Gandhi and Martin Luther King that empathy and tolerance are encouraged for all –in the classroom, in the school and the world. Student behavior is predicated on how spiritual human beings treat one another. This deep spiritual connection is the most effective bullying policy we know.

**The Academic:** Each of the students and staff is on a rigorous academic journey and they assist one another in that journey. The school’s primary goal is to develop the intellect that God gave them and to honor Him in the process. The rest comes naturally. With state of the art curricula, based on standards and assessments, the school challenges and motivates all students. Reading, writing and math are essential skills that feed the essence of an integrated curriculum. Every subject is of significance including the Fine Arts--for they are not compartmentalized but are part and parcel of the truly integrated and educated person. In addition, extracurricular activities reinforce and enrich that academic journey.

**The Curriculum:** The school curriculum mapping is standards and assessment based and exceeds the State of Connecticut Department of Education Curriculum Standards. It has been developed with the best resources and professional development available. Instructional leaders in every subject area work with the teachers to keep it current and alive.

**The Physical:** Each of the students and staff is on a physical journey and they assist one another on that journey. The Greeks knew all too well that in order for the spirit and the intellect to be fully alive they must be enshrined in a sound body. In an age when drugs, alcohol and various other abuses of the body are rampant the school recognizes the importance of the body. Whether it is the state of the art standard based physical education program, after school activities or the focus on nutritional lunches the school honors the body as a gift.

**The Instruction:** Therefore there are several journeys. Like a great chef the good ingredients are in the cooking. The school uses data to assess student performance, digs deep to find if that performance is lacking and why, seeks professional development if needed, and provides appropriate instruction and reassessment. There is the use of differentiated instruction and the instructional leader for differentiation works with teachers –professional development in the classroom. Essential questions are used realizing that higher level thinking skill development is a critical part of the mission. There is a 21<sup>st</sup> century technology plan that provides the school with the tools necessary to enhance learning in all areas. The newly renovated facility provides everything from a wireless environment to new gym to a fully equipped science laboratory. It is the school’s belief that students are at risk at both ends of the spectrum—those needing

remediation and those who need deeply enriched challenges. Very qualified teachers face that challenge for they are truly instructional specialists and artists—the most important ingredient.

## **INDICATORS OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

**Assessment Results:** Assessments help measure the progress of the academic journey.

These assessments are important in helping inform the instruction and continue the refinement of the standards based curriculum maps. A formal online assessment program called Blue Ribbon is being piloted in which students are able to assess their progress in reading, math, science and writing. This provides immediate feedback to the teacher and students on individual and class progress. There is a Diocesan math criterion reference test given to all 4<sup>th</sup> graders as well.

There are a variety of other assessments beyond testing but the one test that has been most helpful is the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). This test is administered to students in grades 3-7. As is explained to students and parents the ITBS is administered to fulfill three main purposes: (1) to obtain information that can support instructional decisions, (2) to provide information to support students and their parents for monitoring the student's growth from grade to grade, and (3) to examine the yearly progress of cohort groups as they pass through the school's curriculum. There are five achievement tests that relate to reading and math. Students in reading are assessed in vocabulary, reading comprehension including factual understanding, inference and interpretation, and analysis and generalization. Students in math are assessed in math concepts and estimation, math problem solving and data interpretation, and math computation.

Based on the ITBS reading and math data Saint Mary School students are consistently above the qualifying score. In almost all cases, the grade level scores exceed the cut off score by at least 10-20 points! Over the last three years, cohort groups show consistent achievement growth. Also based in the data 80% of the current 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are ready for algebra.

The staff is trained to interpret the ITBS results and a plan is written that addresses areas for improvement.

### **Using Assessment Results:**

As soon as the Iowa Test results arrive data teams of teachers study them. This analysis is directed at individual student performance as well as class performance and the progress of cohort groups. Based on this analysis the school looks at the implications for the curriculum maps which are an ongoing process.

There is a process that is used called data driven decision making that includes teacher goal setting. A teacher will assess the data digging deep to find the reasons for any weakness, review possible instructional methods, seek professional development if necessary, instruct and reassess. For instance the 5<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher assessed serious math multiplication deficiencies in her class, attended a workshop on new math computational instructional methods, implemented it and reassessed to find significant improvement in student achievement. She then proudly shared it with the rest of the staff. It should be emphasized that both formative and summative assessments have a critical role year round in improving student achievement.

The immediate primary goal is to focus on the improvement of individual student achievement and there are a variety of measures that are taken. Classroom teachers quickly address the

situation in the classroom. There are two learning specialists that work with the teachers in providing not only individual student support but also provide professional development for the teachers in refining differentiated instruction in the classrooms. Each subject area has an Instructional Leader that reviews the progress as well as assesses curriculum implications. Also they make sure that the areas for improvement are addressed across the curriculum. It is based on the belief that in a spiritual professional community of learners all are responsible. Certainly such areas as reading and writing transcend any one subject!

### **Communicating Assessment Results:**

The school's mission calls for the continued development and spiritual support of every student by and through all the members of our community—parents, staff, clergy, fellow students, our school system, and the parishioners of the parish.

Before our ITBS assessments a letter is sent to all of the parents explaining what the tests are about, how they will be used and how they as parents can provide the emotional and physical support for their children to help make the test as accurate as possible. Students are also informed and told the test is a means not to judge them but to help the community see where any improvements can be made. Again we emphasize it is all about honoring God through developing the intellect He gave them. In that light we ask them to see it as a *self assessment and a celebration*. Results are therefore given a much more meaningful context.

Upon receiving the ITBS results they are directly communicated to the staff for analysis and a letter is sent to each parent informing them of their child's status with an explanation and encouraging them to contact their child's teacher for further explanation if necessary. Results are shared with the students and become another means to improving achievement.

Communication of assessment of student progress is on going throughout the year and includes student work based on rubrics, progress reports, quarterly report cards, church bulletins, local media, newsletters from teachers, parent conferences, the weekly e-mail "blast" to parents, daily parent/teacher e-mails, and our new web site that posts the information in a generic context.

### **Sharing Success:**

As mentioned earlier the school sees itself as a spiritual community of learners—staff, parents and students! Learning together, the teachers as well as the principal, make that *obvious* to students. The community is truly on a common journey—adults and children together. It is from this perspective that the school enthusiastically shares with other schools.

The principal has a representative student council that meets periodically to discuss the state of the school including its successes. Some of the best ideas for success come from the students! These ideas along with the staff and parent ideas are shared in a variety of forums. The successes are shared with other schools when Saint Mary School teachers meet to work on the district curriculum maps. The principal brings the ideas to district administrative meetings as well as the multi school cluster meetings. They are shared at the district's Teacher Institute and retreats. Along with the district the school shares its successes at national conferences such as the National Conference on Curriculum Mapping held in Park City Utah last summer. Articles based on these successes are reported to the media and placed on the school website for other schools to see as well.

Of particular note is the work with local high school students including a number of Saint Mary School graduates in providing the students internships in order to explore a career in what is the most important profession—teaching.

## CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

**Curriculum:** The curriculum is standards based and exceeds the State of Connecticut Department of Education Curriculum Standards.

**Mathematics:** The overall objectives of the mathematics curriculum is to give students effective mathematical tools and strategies (such as deductive reasoning skills and the use of manipulatives) which they can apply to real life situations through instruction in numbers and operations, algebraic thinking, measurement, geometry, probability, statistics, data analysis, and, number relationships and problem solving. Students are given a placement test to determine which class they are to be placed in including the accelerated classes. Teachers take into account the scores on the placement exam, scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and recommendations from the previous teacher before placement. Math is authentically applied such as the geometric study of Greek architecture, and the area and volume of donuts and donut boxes for a dozen donuts, math fairs, and a celebration of “PI Day” including having “Apple PI”!

**Language Arts:** The purpose of the curriculum is to produce skilled students who can analyze and appreciate literature, read with great proficiency, write with clarity, listen and not just hear, and speak with the force of logic and conviction. Integrated in their writing is the appropriate use of grammar, mechanics and usage. All of the elements of the curriculum are focused on thinking skills and the fact that reading and writing are truly processes of thinking. MLA is used in the program. Literature such as Shakespeare is studied, a special Renaissance Day is held and a mock trial based on the book “To Kill a Mockingbird” takes place. Both are examples of the application of the curriculum.

**Art:** The goal of art in the school is to foster autonomy, artistic expression and the appreciation of other cultures. There are four areas of education: studio art, art history, art criticism, and art theory. By graduation each student is exposed to a wide variety of art experiences that seek to strengthen his or her powers of observation, analysis, self-expression, and provide the student with an artistic vocabulary and those skills needed for life long art appreciation. The use of computers is an integral part of the instruction as well as local community institutions such as the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art.

**Music:** The school mission is to honor God and an appreciation of the beauty of music certainly is instrumental in that pursuit. Students sing a variety of songs. They read and notate music and are expected to listen and analyze music. Evaluation of music and musical performances is required. There are cross curriculum connections as well. An appreciation of present day music as an expression of history and culture is stressed. Music is seen in the context of the human experience. Students perform in plays, the Christmas Pageant and the talent show as well.

**Physical Education:** As an important part of the mission of educating the whole person is the engagement of all students in physical education classes twice a week. Physical well being is assessed by formal standards based assessments. Students are involved in activities that can be sustained and carried into adult life. Students are given the opportunity to develop character traits such as fair play, courtesy, honesty, self control, truthfulness, loyalty, and sportsmanship. At the present time, the choice by challenge physical education program, Project Adventure, is in the process of being incorporated into the curriculum.

**Religion:** Our religious curriculum goes beyond the specific and powerful liturgies of the Catholic Faith to embrace the spirit of the Judeo Christian heritage of 2000 years ago. There is formal religious instruction in all of the classes within a school environment of mutual respect and caring. Numerous activities take place during the year under the support of the Director of the Campus Ministry including the Christmas Pageant, Living Stations of the Cross, regular visits to our school Adoration Chapel and charitable services. The values of the Gospel permeate the entire curriculum to give true meaning to the human experience, past and present.

**Social Studies:** The goal of social studies is to develop competent readers, writers and thinkers in the study of historical, geographical, economic and political concepts and their application. Through the study of social studies students become aware of different cultures and customs in order to develop an understanding and appreciation of those cultures and traditions and how our own culture is enriched as a result. The subject is taught through a combination of hands-on and developmentally appropriate activities. For instance, 8<sup>th</sup> graders become Mayor of Ridgefield for the day and students also become troublesome American colonists who must deal with the King played by the Principal, and celebrate Heritage Night after their study and field trip to Ellis Island.

**Technology:** Technology is used to educate and empower administrators, teachers, staff and students to become self directed, continuous learners and ethical, responsible citizens in the future. It is used as a vehicle of communication, analysis, and research in the light of Catholic values and moral decision-making of a global, technological society. In this light, all students take computer classes weekly in a state of the art computer lab and technology is integrated into the various subjects including making power point presentations and art projects (e.g. The Kandinsky Project). All teachers have laptops, with computers in the classroom along with laptops on carts for students. The science lab has the most recent technology and Smart Boards are in use. The entire building is wireless.

**World Language: French and Spanish:** Students study both French and Spanish. K-5 and in 6-8, students have a choice of studying either French *or* Spanish full time. They are introduced to both languages in oral and written form as well as to give them an appreciation of the cultures of the countries in which the language is spoken. The curriculum is implemented in a variety of ways including question and response, the reading of novels, puzzles, games, songs, videos, arts and crafts, cooking, and the French and Spanish Exposition. Computers and online sites are used to enhance the language study.

### **Reading:**

The school's mission is to academically develop each individual student. Given that position a balanced literacy approach is used to differentiate student needs based on assessments including the Iowa test data, the use of the new Blue Ribbon computer assessment system and various teacher made assessments.

A wide variety of instructional methods and materials are used. Included in this array of tools are DRA2 and leveled books, trade books, guided reading, read aloud, shared reading, supportive writing experiences, and running records. The Scott Foresman series is used for the instructional and assessment tools it offers.

All teachers in the school are literacy teachers. The school has a reading specialist who provides small group instruction based on specific assessed student needs. Also the school has a full time

coach for differentiated instruction who works with the teachers on addressing reading and writing in the classroom. The Wilson Reading Program is directed at students grades 2-8 and focuses on reading patterns in reading real words and nonsense words as well as sentence reading for fluency, spelling for encoding and decoding, and paragraph reading for reading comprehension and fluency. Literature Circles are very popular with the students. Parents are actively involved in the reading program as well.

Reading and writing instruction is a cross curriculum venture! For instance in social studies in the upper grades a guided reading program will be used to assess student needs for instruction and comprehension levels leading to explicit small group instruction.

Of course the enjoyment of life long reading and the appreciation of literature is a major goal and students are encouraged to read personally and as part of the State of Connecticut's Governor's Summer Reading Challenge (often with themed grade connections) and for charitable endeavors like the Read to Feed program by Heifer International. Two Scholastic Book Fairs are held as well. Students have the opportunity throughout the school year to be involved in reading supportive activities such as the school play, class performances, class projects, the school newspaper and an after school enrichment program facilitated by the Director of Student Life.

### **Additional Curriculum Area:**

The school's mission of rigorous academic challenge as well as spiritual insight and understanding is seen throughout the science curriculum. Based on standards that exceed the State of Connecticut's Science Standards it is an inquiry-oriented program that stresses the scientific process, critical thinking, and the fundamental concepts of four major types of science: physical science, earth science, life science and science and technology.

There is hands-on learning, guided reading (which is cross curricular), and the use of technology. Laptops in the science lab are used for interactive labs, lesson plans and pod casting. This use of technology helps strengthen the students' understanding of how science and technology are integrated and helps the skills the students learn in their computer lab come to life.

Monitoring and supporting the science curriculum implementation are Instructional Leaders-one for K-5 and another for 6-8. In grades 6-8 each student has a copy of the standards based curriculum and self assesses their individual progress. In grades K-5 a developmentally appropriate science curriculum is posted on the wall in each classroom where the teacher and class monitor their progress. Therefore students are conversant in talking about the curriculum and their relationship to it.

Science is authentically applied in a variety of ways including science fairs with the use of rubrics. In religion/science teachers ask as the essential question: where is the aesthetic beauty and spirit in nature and why? Authors are invited to come and speak such as Andrew Revkin of the *New York Times* on his book "**The North Pole Was Here**". There is a day devoted to understanding and saving the rain forest. The entire school participates and the money raised goes to buying an "acre" of the rainforest. The Connecticut First Artillery Brigade brought a Civil War cannon to the school and fired it off (blanks only) and described how it was used. Science used the experience to apply physics. The art program and its Instructional Leader organized with Fairfield University an interdisciplinary program on Greek architecture which included students visiting the university. Science used the experience to apply the study of technology on Ancient Greek construction methods.

### **Instructional Methods:**

Instruction is an important element in the student achievement paradigm which includes data driven assessment, professional development when needed, appropriate instruction and reassessment. Both formative and summative assessments are used.

The school's Instructional Leaders, which exist in all subject areas, are involved in the development of instructional methods and resources. The Instructional Leader for Differentiation works closely in support of teachers' instructional needs. The school believes that it must address student differentiation across the continuum, especially students who are at a high risk-those students needing remediation and those students who need a strongly enriched challenge.

Various technologies are used to assess student performance and a great emphasis is placed on student self assessment and reflections on what might work best for them. They are engaged in peer-editing and teaching each other. Performance tasks are used with the appropriate rubrics for assessments. Writing assignments, theatrical plays, hands on activities, guided reading, research, and role playing are only some of the methods used. Instructional technology is used by students in the classroom with computers, in the computer lab, with laptops and with classroom Smart Boards which are being phased in. All the above methods are curriculum specific, timely and highly engaging.

Emphasis is placed on both interdisciplinary instruction and it is the school's belief that the community, state and the world are the school's classroom for instruction. This includes writing, art projects and presentations at both the Ridgefield Playhouse and the Westport County Playhouse. Students won contests at *both* playhouses. A program has been developed with the local Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art that includes writing, art and the application of higher level thinking skills including the formal development of student metacognition skills. Field trips to the State Capital to study state government and to Boston to study the American Revolution are only two of our curriculum related field trips. And there is a direct connection to the poor in Ocos, Peru where written student communication in Spanish takes place as part of the school's charitable mission. We are presently starting a relationship with a school for homeless boys in Haiti. A direct connection (video conferencing) with various parts of the world is being explored. And first and second grade students become learning "buddies" while the third grade students share with the preschool students.

Homework is given and is closely related to enhancing classroom lessons. Assignments are posted on our school's website. Finally, essential questions, writing as a process of thinking, and reading are infused in all subject instructional areas.

### **Professional Development:**

As a spiritual community of learners staff and students follow the school's mission of personal self development. Teachers model the learning that is expected of students and it is the basis for the professional goal setting that takes place.

All teachers in the school are involved with the writing and implementation of curriculum in their specific subject area as well as cross curriculum strands like writing and reading. To develop this curriculum and instruction and keep it current teachers have attended workshops, taken courses at local universities, engaged in professional workshops sponsored by the Diocese (e.g. literacy) and attended special conferences like the Anti Defamation League's local conference on

the Holocaust and its new program **Echoes and Reflections**. Through Diocesan support the Principal was sent to Utah for the National Mapping Conference. Both the teachers and Principal report back to the staff on their professional development.

Some of the best professional development takes place within the classrooms where modeling takes place not only by external trainers and consultants but by teachers in the school for one another. The Instructional Leader for Differentiation also provides professional development directly in the classroom. In addition time is set aside twice a month for professional development after school and a released day is set aside during the school year as well as 2 half days. Before school begins there are 2 full days set aside for professional development.

All teachers assess student achievement. Areas for improvement are designated. Often teachers will then seek specific professional development to find better instructional approaches. An example is the teacher who assessed math computation weaknesses in her classroom and found a new instructional method, **Mastering Math Facts**, and attended professional development for it.



