



Saint Mary School

RIDGEFIELD

HSA Meeting Minutes

January 5, 2024

HSA Board Attendees:

Ann Russell & Allison Carballo, HSA Co-Presidents

Marcy Miller & Kristy Pylypshyn, HSA Co-Vice Presidents

Janine Simon, HSA Co-Treasurer

Meghan Newman, Room Parent Coordinator

Welcome and Updates from Rachel Ambrosio:

- Rachel opened the meeting with a prayer.

- Rachel delivered the State of the School, discussing enrollment demographics, class size, Catholic identity, academic excellence, the Saint Mary Community, and the future of the school. All slides will be available on the school website for parents to review more thoroughly.
 - 53% of SMS students are from Ridgefield
 - To further our Catholic identity, the parish priests have become more involved with the classrooms, particularly at the middle school level where Father Lomnitzer comes into the Religion class for 6-8 grades once each week. All grades are going to the Adoration Chapel regularly.
 - Interactive boards have been installed in all 2-8 grade classrooms. Technology is used to enhance learning, but parents were assured that students are not on screens all day.
 - IOWA and Edmentum Diagnostics are two tools used to evaluate the academic success of the school. Teachers do not teach for these tests, but the test information is used to guide areas that need additional attention.
 - As we look to the future, the school is stable financially and academically. The school is currently undergoing the NEASC 10 year accreditation process, which will be completed this spring.

- The floor was opened for questions.
 - One parent asked if there are plans to change middle school report cards to the same system as the younger grades, switching from a standard A-F grading

system to a numerical 0-4 proficiency system. There are concerns that the numerical system will make it difficult for students applying to high schools, particularly those outside of the diocese, as schools will have difficulty gauging how students compare to peers from schools that use a standard A-F grading system. Rachel responded that there are no plans at this time to switch 5-8 grades to the numerical system.

- A parent asked about the financial stability of SMS. Rachel and Amy Dowding assured parents that the school is financially sound and is looking for ways to utilize or invest the money wisely so there are sufficient funds available for scholarships and families in need.
- A parent was concerned about teacher retention. Rachel explained that, as of now, she is expecting all the current teachers to return next year. She has not been notified at this time of any teachers planning to leave SMS. Rachel did explain that we sometimes lose young teachers after a few years due to the salary. The diocese determines the salaries according to the teachers' education and experience. The pre-determined salary is very low, especially for the area in which we live. The St Mary Fund helps SMS show their appreciation to our teachers through Staff Appreciation Awards distributed at the end of the year. The teachers are only able to receive these additional funds if there is remaining money in the St Mary Fund after all needs are met for the school and students, including depositing money into a school emergency fund. The emergency fund was particularly useful during two events in recent years—after Sandy Hook, when SMS hired security officers immediately after, and during COVID when the school had to purchase additional items to ensure the health and safety of the school students and staff. Rachel and Amy stressed that SMS teachers truly love teaching at SMS. The teachers come to SMS and stay for the environment, students, flexibility in teaching strategies, and our Catholic values. Finances are the primary reason they leave. Rachel stated that SMS has had teachers who began at SMS right after college, leave for a period of time, and then return because they enjoy the school so much. Rachel is open to any suggestions parents may have to improve teacher retention, especially pertaining to the financial aspect.
 - Amy stressed that the St Mary Fund is critical to the success of the school. She strongly encourages families to contribute what they are able. This allows the school to continue providing the necessities for the students and the school and also gives SMS the ability to provide additional financial help to teachers through the Staff Appreciation Awards.
- Another parent asked about the manner in which the diocese closes schools and was confused as to why SMS is listed as an LLC. Rachel explained that the Bishop oversees all Catholic schools in the diocese. The Bishop and Superintendent's Office do not shut down schools that are thriving, as SMS is and has been. If a school is having difficulty and has been flagged by the diocese, the diocese will alert the school prior to any shutdowns. Parents at

schools in the diocese that were recently closed were aware that their schools were facing difficulties as class sizes typically declined and some grades may even be combined due to lack of enrollment. SMS is an LLC, but it is still fully overseen by the Bishop. As Rachel explained, she does not have authority to do just anything she chooses to do. For example, she cannot go to a bank and open an SMS account without prior approval. She also stated that all financials are reviewed monthly to ensure everything is as it should be.

- Rachel had to excuse herself for another meeting but expressed her appreciation to all those who attended the meeting, both in person and virtually, and thanked parents for their questions. Parents are welcome to contact Rachel with any additional questions they may have.

Updates From Amy Dowding:

- Amy reminded parents that the JV and Varsity Boys Basketball games will be held tonight. The JV game will begin at 6:30pm followed by the Varsity game. The SMS cheerleaders will cheer at the JV game.
- Midterms for Middle Schoolers will be next week.
 - Midterms count for a very small portion of the final grade, but the process of studying for larger tests is an important skill for the students to learn and will benefit them in high school.
 - The Middle School Breakfast will be held on Friday 1/12 and middle school students are invited to dress down that day.
- SMS will be hosting hospitality after Mass on January 21st following the 9am and 12pm Masses. More information will be coming, but the school will be looking for individuals to volunteer to donate light refreshments and to volunteer to help that day.
- The Grade 5 parent meeting will be held on 1/25. Please be sure to RSVP and submit any questions you may have.
- Catholic Schools Week
 - To be held the last week in January
 - A special newsletter specific to the activities planned for the week will be sent to parents next week. There will be themed dress down days and special events.
 - Thursday of Catholic Schools Week is our class and school spirit day. Students are invited to dress head to toe in their class color and there will be an award for the class with the most spirit. A pep rally is held during the school day Thursday and the alumni vs. student basketball game will be held that evening.
 - The week will end with Mass on Friday.

- If you have not completed enrollment for next school year, please do so immediately. For planning purposes, it is helpful for Amy to know sooner rather than later if your child will or will not be returning next school year.
 - The Preschool enrollment deadline is next Friday, 1/12.
 - K-8 enrollment deadline is Wednesday, 1/31.

HSA Updates From Allison Carballo:

- Allison passed around a sign in sheet that included checkboxes to indicate if parents are interested in helping with the Father Daughter Dance, Mother Son Night, Teacher Appreciation Week, or the Gala. All parents are encouraged to get involved in any way they can.
- Audrey Road discount coupons were distributed to attendees and Allison mentioned that next month, Danielle Verrilli from Audrey Road will bring some boutique items, such as earrings, that will be available for purchase at a discount after the meeting.
- The ParentPlus Portal App was mentioned in the newsletter this past week. Allison and Kristy Pylypshyn discussed some of the benefits to the app such as easy access to the school calendar, uniform guidelines, assignment grades for middle school students, and access to recent newsletters. The app can be downloaded for both Apple and Android devices.
- The Senior Luncheon, led by Andrea Wolf, will be held on 1/9.
- Middle School Breakfast
 - Monica Blackman reported on the preparations for the breakfast. It will be a winter theme and each student will receive a penguin stress ball. Each grade has been assigned to an aspect of the breakfast:
 - 6th Grade—decorations
 - 7th Grade—desserts
 - 8th Grade—drinks
- Father Daughter Dance
 - Tricia van Brakel and Janine Simon reported that we have 187 people attending the dance.
 - The committee needs volunteers to help decorate the Hall, particularly from 10am-2pm on 1/19. Volunteers must be VIRTUS Trained. Contact Tricia or Janine or just stop by if you are able to help.
 - More than 50 dozen desserts are needed. Please see the Sign Up Genius link in the newsletter if you are able to help with this.
 - An email will go out to families with all of the final details for the night

- Photography should be purchased in advance as no credit cards are accepted the night of the dance.
 - When purchasing, be sure to enter just one daughter's name exactly as it is in the directory. If it does not match, you may have difficulty purchasing. If you still have trouble, contact Tricia and she will tell you exactly how the name needs to be entered.
- Audrey Road will once again be donating the gift for the 8th Grade girls.
- Family Bingo Night
 - Marcy Miller encouraged families to register for the event. Please RSVP on the Sign Up Genius link in the newsletter.
 - This is NOT a drop off event. It is an opportunity for families to have fun together.
 - There will be food available to purchase and prizes.
- Mother Son Night
 - Marcy and Meghan Newman reported on the planning for the night.
 - The event will use some of the new space available at Boys and Girls Club of Ridgefield.
 - Dessert donations will be requested. The Sign Up Genius for this will be distributed the week after the Father Daughter Dance.
 - RSVPs are needed! The deadline is 1/16. Middle school boys and their moms are strongly encouraged to attend.
 - The committee is expecting to hold one more meeting in the next week or two.
- Coffee and Conversation
 - This event led by Laura Maher will be moved from Wednesday morning to immediately following the HSA meetings.
 - In February, SMS dad Christopher Blackman will talk about technology and social media
 - In March, Laura is expecting to have Rachel Gorman, a Speech-Language Pathologist speak
 - Meg Whitbeck, an SMS mom, will discuss nutrition at a meeting this spring
- Gala
 - Renee Whitworth reported that volunteers are needed to help with the Gala
 - When looking for donations, Renee asked that individuals solicit gift cards more than items.
 - Sponsors for ticket sales are needed.
 - Tables at Hotel Zero Degrees will seat 8. Individuals interested in having a reserved table for a group can purchase the table in advance.

- Teacher Appreciation Week
 - Sam Maio and Kate Cecil are leading this event.
 - A committee meeting will be held on 1/17 after drop off to discuss theme ideas and activities.
 - Sam will look into a virtual option for the meeting for those who cannot attend in person.
- Golf
 - Andrea Wolf reported that the event, to be held in May, will need a lot of bottles of wine donated for the wine pull.
 - As we did last year, if you do not want to go to a store to purchase the wine yourself, parents will have the ability to authorize an amount to be charged to their FACTS account for this purpose. Andrea will use those funds to purchase bottles for the event.

****The next HSA Meeting will be held on February 2, 2024.****