



## **St. Mary's Communications, Marketing, Enrollment and Development Plan**

*"We, the family of St. Mary's School, are committed to promoting Catholic values to God's children through faith, Christ-centered worship, service and academic excellence."*

The marketing, communications, enrollment and development plan is consistent with the school's mission statement: We, the family of St. Mary's School, are committed to promoting Catholic values to God's children through faith, Christ-centered worship, service and academic excellence. This plan promotes the growth of the Catholic faith among the school community. Liturgical celebration of the Word and Sacrament are an important part of the school experience. We believe in the development of the faith through the creed, prayer and commandments. Recent developments in communications include creating a YouTube channel that includes videos about Masses, Adoration, Christmas shows and The Rosary along with student work. St. Mary's School provides a strong academic curriculum with a dedicated faculty that develops student relationships to God, self, humanity, and nature. Faith and moral values are the foundation upon which the curriculum is built. New methods of communication such as a Student Information System (SIS) and a master schedule of assignments for students in grade 7 and 8 has enhanced academics in that members of the school community can check for grades and missing assignments at any time. The works of charity and service that we do are promoted on our webpage and social media.

### **Communications Plan**

While this document serves as St. Mary's School's formal communication plan, the school also relies on informal means of communication. The communication plan is based largely off of the school's mission statement which states the desire for a strong religious and academic school that makes connections with parishioners, especially multigenerational family parishioners, while communicating with the wider community in a way that is both equitable and accessible. Students, staff, current parents, parishioners and community members help carry out the communication plan.

A stated goal of the school is to create an environment that is religious, academic, safe, caring and participatory. These attributes can be attained through self-analysis and can be based off actions and verifiable data in addition to anecdotal evidence. Religious includes developing our Catholic faith in all stakeholders. Academic relates to content knowledge as well as hidden curriculum, which includes developing a work ethic. Creating a safe and caring environment are related ideas as both involve developing a relationship with others. Participatory entails getting people involved, finding the strengths of people and then putting them in a position to be successful.

For this desired environment to occur, the school must effectively communicate to internal and external stakeholders. To communicate effectively, it is important to communicate regularly and consistently. Communication includes talking to people directly involved face to face, as well as through writing to document situations. Weekly newsletters with Monday folders are sent home to parents as well as conferences at least once a year with an update of their child's progress. A 2021 education committee request to improve communications through sending the weekly newsletter home through Remind has been followed. All members of the school staff need to follow this communication plan as they serve as school ambassadors, having a large role in how

the school is perceived thus how they present the school is extremely important. Internal communications among staff has improved with the 2018 implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) to discuss students, analyze data and organize events. Becoming a Google school and Sycamore has helped staff collaborate through student missing assignment reports and a study hall check out form initiated in 2021 to help students that need help to get to the relevant teacher.

Communication with St. Mary's stakeholders is done in a variety of ways. Three bulletins transmit information to the community with an internal daily one informing staff and students, a weekly Monday one serving as a link to current parents, and a monthly one presenting information to the wider community. Internal communication is also done through monthly staff meetings, bimonthly professional learning communities by grade level, email communication and face to face conversations. Communication with the wider community is done through email communication, Sycamore (our Student Information System), face to face conversations including Parent Student Teacher conferences, Remind messages for items such as school closure due to inclement weather, Facebook page, YouTube channel, a school website and advisory committee meetings. The website has information on a wide array of topics, such as parent information and forms, tuition assistance, academics, curriculum, extracurriculars and schedules, library, hot lunch and how to give financially to the school. There are no managerial school boards in our Diocesan schools, rather advisory committees including the education and home and school committee that consist of current school staff and parents. Parish and finance councils also have some influence, largely financial as they approve salaries and budgets, over the school and consist of current parents, school staff, the parish priest, principal and community members. Surveys on such items as virtual learning and the hot lunch program were completed

in 2020 to gauge students' and parents' opinions as well as more encompassing surveys that were related to WCSA accreditation in 2022. The survey results indicate approval of how information is communicated, but would like a more formal process of communicating concerns to the school. There are many forms of communications which creates a delicate line between streamlining communication while keeping preferred or accessible lines of communication. Staff are a major part of communications and part of their employment reviews include assessment on whether they communicate effectively with the wider community.

### **Recent Changes**

St. Mary's will continue to use existing technology to build school-community relations but will also expand the use of technology. For example, report cards were done in pen on a triplicate form, and now they are done through Sycamore, our SIS, with parents being able to see past report cards at any time. The new online grading system has helped close the feedback loop as parents can see grades and assignments. The need to have all classroom information in one spot with the technology powerful enough to provide the needed information was discussed with the wider community. For example, the Home and School committee received sandbox accounts for the 6 proposed SIS and consulted with the school principal before the purchase of Sycamore. Furthermore, when we had a schedule change in activities, it was typed on a typewriter, and then sent home with the students with the hope that the parents that the change affected received the half sheet. We have changed to emails and texts which are a more reliable form of communication. A more automated system of communication is continuing to be developed. An app for athletics, Game Changer, is being implemented for the winter 2022 sports season to see if this will lead to more effective communications when sports events are changed.

## **Barriers to Success**

There are several barriers to the communication plan. Some people may be resistant due to the desire to keep tradition and the fear of change. There are also time constraints for all people involved thus recruiting people and their time, talent and treasure would be necessary. Our technology infrastructure had a significant upgrade in 2020, through electrical work and access points in each classroom, but needed and ongoing updates will be costly. This barrier is mitigated by the idea that St. Mary's parishioners are generous when they know the money will be spent wisely.

## **Marketing Plan**

St. Mary's ability to communicate effectively and in a variety of ways, directly relates to St. Mary's ability to market the school and its policies. St. Mary's has created partnerships with external groups and expanded its resources including the local media, webpage, business partners, parishioners, and school newsletters. In 2019, an annual Christmas commercial played on 89Q wishes listeners a Merry Christmas but also reminds prospective families of St. Mary's school. School accomplishments and upcoming events are submitted and published in the local newspaper, The Record Review. Business partners have a large role in St. Mary's fundraisers and are also recognized in submissions to The Record Review as well as our website and newsletters. Spirit wear sales and Pop Socket donations, both including the school logo, help promote the school in the local community.

The development of technology used for marketing has addressed the ease of access to information. The importance of social media in external communications is noteworthy. Our school's Facebook page's main purpose is to provide external communication largely through

showing pictures of activities that the students have participated in, thus marketing the school. Although an official Facebook page serves as St. Mary's social media communications component, community opinions can also be diagnosed via posts from individual school and community members' Facebook accounts. St. Mary's small size is conducive to just a handful of Facebook Friends representing a significant block of constituents. Much of our communication and marketing is also through word of mouth, after church or social events such as at the Friday Fish Fry.

Some stakeholders have a preference for receiving information without the use of technology. A monthly paper insert in the parish bulletin, largely describing school accomplishment, is well-received by parishioners especially our older population. In 2019, the school started "Breakfast at St. Mary's" which invites parishioners into the school for breakfast but also to witness our students and staff in action is another marketing tool. Grandparent's Day plays a similar role to Breakfast at St. Mary's.

The implementation of both the communications and marketing plan has helped facilitate improved school-community relations. A unified message which is more transparent has made it less likely that there will be misinformation and address equitable access to information. St. Mary's current communication and marketing has become more streamlined. This hybrid system has worked in that more technical, as well as those lacking in technological resources and knowledge, can participate in the system.

### **Enrollment**

St. Mary's School has been able to increase enrollment over the last five years while still staying true to our values. Students that enroll are largely parishioners as word of mouth and tradition are

a large driver in enrollment. This “Friday Fish Fry” strategy has been an effective way of keeping existing families who also recruit other families they think would be a good fit for St. Mary’s. We are currently not a choice school and have no plans to become one. With the low cost of tuition, we can find funding for prospective families without needing to rely on the choice program. Our “Better, Then Bigger” strategy has emphasized becoming a better school in terms of the needs of our stakeholders as more important than a growing enrollment. However, the end result has been a better school that has attracted more prospective students and families.

Our main enrollment tool is a database of parishioners at St. Mary’s who have children that are three to five years old and were baptized at St. Mary’s. The parish secretary creates a spreadsheet of these children which is then sent to the school principal. Invites are then sent to these families to attend open houses on the days of our Christmas Concert and Mission Carnival. A letter is sent to these families as well, which invites students to attend St. Mary’s. Ongoing research on the effectiveness of this strategy has been developed which includes percentage of parishioners who send their students to St. Mary’s, percentage of students who are parishioners and percentage of students who are children of alumni. Starting with data collected in 2015 – 16, 59% of children baptized at St. Mary’s, later attended St. Mary’s school which climbs to 75% when looking at children who are still in the Marathon district. When looking at each year’s 5K class at St. Mary’s since 2015-16, 87% of the students were baptized at St. Mary’s while 62% had at least one parent who attended St. Mary’s. Our goal in the next three years is to maintain those percentages. Enrollment has increased from 164 in the 2017-18 school year to 185 in the 2022-23 school year. With the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class being the smallest class and three of the four smallest classes being in grades 5 – 8, continued growth is a realistic goal.

We have seen an increase in those who were not baptized at St. Mary's become students here. Many are considering St. Mary's due to its traditional curriculum and safe environment according to tour interviews. Specific data will be developed from tours who decide to enroll at our school. An exit interview form has been designed to see why students who leave decide to leave. Additional data will be collected on those who are outside the community and tour the school, and why they decide to enroll or not.

### **Development**

Fundraising is a strength of St. Mary's as school parents, parishioners and the wider community are financially supportive. The fundraisers are creative, well-managed and effective.

Parishioners, through Sunday collections, are generous leading to a financial situation where in 2017-18 over 90% of the school was funded by the parish compared to parish schools typically being funded at 40 to 70% by their parish. There has been a move to diversify funding for the school which includes grants and external development, which now account for 20% of the budget, which is a change from less than 1% five year ago. A major challenge will be to keep this percentage of funding at this level. Over the past five years, due to increased development and grants, the percentage of parish support is around 70%. Major fundraisers include a Packer Tailgate Party which helps pay for general expenses, cheese curd sales which helps pay for technology and field trips and a meat sale which helps pay for activities. Catholic organizations' donations, such as the Knights of Columbus, help pay for programs such as remedial reading. Private donations and donations from organizations help provide tuition and lunch assistance.

An overview of the ways to support St. Mary's was created in 2019 and is sent home to current families annually in August, as well as being part of a parish bulletin insert and residing on the



school website. Included are contributions at Mass, company donations, participation in school fundraisers, purchasing items through Amazon Smile and SCRIP, donation to the school and/or Marathon school districts Educational Endowment, recycling through the Magic Paper Box, Box Tops for Education, Memorial/Will/Estate designations, donations to school projects, tuition and hot lunch assistance and Pop Tabs.

Practices that needed to be improved and misinformation about finances have been identified and addressed. The belief and sense of entitlement that those that raised the money, can spend it without consultation, has been challenged and now includes a more consultative approach with school or parish employees as money raised is ultimately parish money. With the lack of consultation, there were times that money was wasted on items that the school could not use. A more centralized approach by parish and school officials, who have ultimate financial responsibility, has been deployed and will continue to be updated. The Diocese of La Crosse audits detailed strengths and weaknesses of our current system and suggested best practices and necessary reforms such as multiple control points. Furthermore, there is incorrect information on the school's income resources and expenses, which can be addressed with continued and increased transparency.

### **Resource Review**

There would be a variety of resources that are needed in order for our plan to continue to be a success. Current parents, students, prospective parents and alumni are the main target audiences and their view of the plan has a large role on whether it will be successful or not. As a parish school, the parishioners, and to some degree the wider community, will play a large role in continued implementation of the plan, whether it be financial or in terms of public opinion.

## **Future Considerations**

There are several areas to consider moving forward. One large part of our communication with parents is the Monday folder in which a paper copy of information gets sent home with students. The parents may not get the information even when it is important information. What are the best ways and avenues to both market the school communicate with parents and the school community need continued analysis. The percentage of external donations and grants will be difficult to sustain. Due to our reliance on funding from parishioners, an analysis on parish support and number of parishioners is needed to see sustainability. Likewise, our enrollment relies heavily on parishioners and alumni so continued analysis is needed.