

SCHOOL PROFILE: St. Mary of Mt. Carmel Catholic School

EARLY HISTORY

St. Mary of Mt. Carmel Catholic School is the oldest school in the Diocese of St. Cloud, having begun in 1853 with the arrival of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Traveling the 120 miles from St. Paul to the Indian Agency of Long Prairie, Sr. Scholastica began teaching religion immediately, with regular academic classes offered in January of 1854 to 60 to 90 students. The school was destroyed by fire during the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Sixteen years would pass before the Sisters of St. Francis arrived to teach in a small wooden school house which would eventually be torn down to make way for a new school.

By 1880, the Benedictine Sisters of St. Joseph, Minnesota arrived to administer and provide classroom teachers. In 1905, construction was begun on the current building, and on February 6, 1906, over 200 students vacated two cramped classrooms in the church basement and moved into their new home. A gym and stage on the 4th floor of the building was utilized into the 1960's when they were closed for school use because of fire codes.

FACILITY IMPROVEMENTS IN MODERN TIMES

In 1983 the school was remodeled with window replacements, lowered ceilings, and new restroom facilities. In 2007 the first St. Mary's School Capital Campaign was held, raising \$50,000. School families, parishioners and the broader community contributed money, goods and/or labor for improvements: replacing the front door entrance, installing drinking fountains, adding lockers in coat closets, building and installing library furnishings, and new lighting throughout the school. Various cosmetic upgrades were also accomplished. In 2012, all windows were again replaced. After a major failure, the old boiler was replaced in 2013 with a high-efficiency furnace.

During the 2017-18 school year, a Building Committee began meeting to assess the condition of the school facilities with a particular eye to safety and code compliance. It was determined that a major capital campaign was needed to address these issues. The possibility of building a new school was proposed to the parish community and soundly defeated. However, there was great support for making improvements to the existing building. The Capital Campaign was kicked off in August, 2018 and received pledges of over \$850,000 to be received over four years.

Originally, all work was scheduled for the summer of 2020. However, with the unknown economic impact of Covid on pledge fulfillment, the committee chose not to take out loans but rather only use cash-on-hand to complete projects. Summary of improvements: Summer 2019: Resurfaced the school roof; filled in and resurfaced old coal storage room. Summer 2020: Installed fire suppression system and new fire escapes; reconfigured library, Title I area, and added a Tutoring/Special Services Room. Summer 2021: Brought exterior electrical panel up to code; removed wallpaper and repaired/painted hallways; replaced stairway railings to meet building safety codes. Remaining improvements: Replace sidewalk and stairs at front entrance and add a second set of doors for energy efficiency; replace all carpet; tuckpointing. All projects should be completed by the summer of 2023.

IMPORTANT CHANGES

Daycare Closure: When the current principal was hired in November, 2016, St. Mary's School was in the process of closing its daycare program that was started in 2013-14. Situated in the old Convent on the

parish grounds, the facility was not ideal, and while enrollment was good, licensing regulations as well as management and financial issues forced its closure at the end of 2016. Unfortunately, the daycare had been a great contributor to increased enrollment in our preschool, and in turn, kindergarten.

Combined Schools: When the current principal was hired, she assumed the joint principalship of St. Mary's and Christ the King School in Browerville. At one time their parish priests and the previous principal were considering a merger of the two schools. By the time the current principal was hired, there seemed little support for this move from parents of either school nor from staff. A survey of parents was taken in January, 2017. Results clearly showing a lack of support for consolidation. Christ the King School was able to hire a part-time principal in the summer of 2017 and they continue to thrive under her leadership.

Industry Closure: In the winter of 2018 a major employer in Long Prairie, RR Donnelley (printing plant) closed its doors, laying off over 250 workers. Over the next year, several St. Mary's School families moved to other cities for employment.

Montessori-Inspired Preschool and Kindergarten: Having gained exposure and experience in Montessori methods through our Catechesis of the Good Shepherd program, the principal, kindergarten and preschool teacher observed in various Montessori classrooms during the fall of 2019 and again in Spring 2021. We became convinced of the merits of this teaching method, and with the support of our pastor and School Council, St. Mary's committed to pursuing Montessori-inspired instruction for 3, 4, and 5-year-olds. In Spring 2020 we purchased a curriculum for teacher study and invested in student classroom materials. With very positive results during the 2020-21 school year, in Spring 2021 both teachers were enrolled in a 7-month, online certificate program through the North American Montessori Center. They will receive their certificates by December, 2021. We feel strongly that the Montessori method offers the best education for this age group, and we are excited to see it develop in the years to come.

ENROLLMENT TRENDS

The largest enrollment recorded was in 1960-61 with 281 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Kindergarten closed in 1965 followed by seventh and eighth grade in 1966. Kindergarten was reopened in 1981. The smallest enrollment recorded was 111 in 1997, which was also the enrollment at the end of 2020-2021 school year. Thirteen students, kindergarten through sixth grade, disenrolled at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year due to the required Covid policies of the school. Exit interviews determined that 3 students left for non-Covid reasons. The reasons the other families left were equally split between those parents who were afraid their children would not be safe from infection and those who would not comply with face masks and social distancing. Five of these students have returned for the 2021-22 school year. In addition, our preschool enrollment declined from twenty-one 3 and 4-year-olds to ten. This decline was because of the uncertainty of Covid closures for our half-day preschool. Reduced preschool has had a negative impact on our kindergarten class with only eight students enrolled for 2020-21. We are pleased, however, to have nineteen preschool students this year.

Our Montessori approach to preschool and kindergarten has already raised interest and enrollment in our school with several young professional families. We believe this will continue as our program gains momentum. We also believe that lacking an all-day preschool/daycare will continue to negatively impact enrollment.

OVERVIEW OF THE BROADER COMMUNITY

The city of Long Prairie has a population of 3,271 in an area of 2.7 square miles. It is located 130 miles northwest of the Twin Cities. The four largest employers are Centra Care Clinic and Hospital, Dan's Prize, Long Prairie Packing, and the LPGE School District. The average age of residents is 43.2 years with 18% of the population 0 to 12 years of age. Sixty-four percent of the population is white while 32% is Hispanic people from Mexico, Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic. The percentage of Hispanic residents continues to increase as job opportunities expand in the meat packing and finished meats industry.

While St. Mary of Mt. Carmel parish is the largest Christian community in Long Prairie, there are eight other Christian denominations within the city.

One public school district serves the combined communities of Long Prairie and Grey Eagle with two separate buildings located in Long Prairie for PreK-6 and 7-12. Long Prairie-Grey Eagle Schools had a 2020-2021 enrollment of 889 students, 465 of whom are Prek-6th. Ethnic make up of the elementary school is 54.2% Latino, 41.3% White, with all others account for remaining 4.5%.

Median household income is \$41,438 with 11.9% of the population falling below the poverty line.

OVERVIEW OF STUDENTS AND FAMILIES SERVED

Our enrollment at the end of the 2020-2021 school year was 101 kindergarten through sixth grade students and 10 preschool students from sixty-five families. Eighty-five percent of preschool through sixth grade students are Catholic with all but three students and their two families attending a Catholic church other than St. Mary's. Seventy-five percent of students are Caucasian and 25% are Hispanic. In contrast, our local public elementary school is 43% Hispanic.

ENROLLMENT TRENDS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The recent high enrollment mark for St. Mary's School was in 2017-18 with 117 kindergarten through sixth grade and 29 preschool students for a total of 146 students. The ensuing three years saw a decline in all enrollment: K-6: 113 to 107 to 101 (14% decline); PreK: 25 to 21 to 10 (60% decline). As noted earlier, Covid had a negative impact on all enrollment, but especially in Preschool. We did have a large Kindergarten class of 18 students in 2020-21 which helped offset other losses in enrollment.

Baptismal records from St. Mary's Parish indicate relatively stable numbers. In 2016 there were a total of 24 baptisms, 13 Hispanic and 11 Anglo; 2017: 24 baptisms at 16/8; 2018: 25 baptisms at 17/8; 2019: 23 Baptisms at 17/6; and 2020: 21 baptisms at 16/5. The trend of more baptisms in our Spanish families than Caucasian will likely continue.

We believe that the steady increase in enrollment from 2013 to 2017-18 was because parents had the option of enrolling their child in our preschool program in the morning and in our family daycare program for the rest of the day. This was located on parish grounds, a short walk from the school. It is very unfortunate that it had to be closed. We are currently investigating ways to either offer our own daycare again for our 3 and 4-year-old preschool students, or work out a cooperative agreement with a nearby facility. We feel this is critical to stabilizing our enrollment. We also feel that developing our Montessori Children's Houses will attract more young families which will have a positive impact on enrollment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS

The survey was conducted at the end of January, 2020. Copies of the survey were sent home in Spanish or English to all families enrolled in St. Mary's School. Various parish members who are involved with the school on a regular basis were also given the survey. Surveys were not mailed to the entire parish, but copies were made available at all Masses with announcements from the ambo and the bulletin encouraging people to participate. Thirty-two surveys were completed and turned into the school.

The survey sought responses in the categories of School and Community Relations, Catholic Teachings and Faith Community, Academic Program, and Learning Environment. Overall, the survey results in every area indicated that our families are very satisfied with the school. Participants see our greatest strengths in the areas of School and Community Relations and Catholic Teachings and Faith Community.

While the other two components showed strong positive survey results, they did indicate areas for growth. Under Learning Environment, participants showed mild concern for the age and upkeep of the building (which has hopefully been addressed with recent upgrades). In the Academic Program section, we were commended on how much we are able to do with so little, but there is always concern with keeping up with technology and replacing dated textbooks.

Individuals who commented on what they saw as the strengths and blessings of attending St. Mary's School most often listed a Christian environment, small class sizes, and dedicated teaching staff as the things they appreciate most. The areas for improvement most often mentioned were more reports and better communication between teachers and parents, more service projects for students, and expanded field trip opportunities. The greatest needs mentioned were all-day preschool, and wishing we had a gym or more space for music and physical education. There is also a growing concern about attracting and keeping qualified teachers.