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ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

EAST LANSING, MI

Final Report

for the

Michigan Nonpublic School Accrediting Association

(School Visitation: April 1 and 2, 2014)

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It is the official intent of the M.N.S.A.A. Board that this report be considered a privileged document of the school. The distribution of the report and its availability for public consideration beyond that point rest solely in the hands of the school administration. Neither the chairperson nor the other members of the Visiting Team are authorized to release any of the information contained in this report without the approval of the administration of the school.

The primary purpose of the Visiting Team was to examine the educational and religious setting of the school, including courses of study, learning materials, student needs and interests, staffing, and facilities. The Visiting Team attempted to assess the effectiveness of the total school program in meeting the educational and religious objectives the school has established for itself and in meeting M.N.S.A.A. standards.

It was not the purpose of the Visiting Team to evaluate individual teacher performance. The use of this report as an official assessment of any staff person's professional competency would be in violation of the process and the intent under which the school evaluation was conducted. Such use would be inherently invalid since at no time during the Team Visit was the Team concerned with the evaluation of individual teacher performance.

Members of the Visiting Team have utilized their best professional judgment in drawing the conclusions reported in this document. The Team members are not to be held accountable for any injudicious or unauthorized use of this document.

FORWARD

Becoming accredited is a strenuous process. The school and its administration are to be highly commended for their efforts in this accreditation process. The self-study document and the various arrangements for the accreditation team were well organized and appreciated by the team. It is the hope and prayer of the members of the visiting team that the enclosed document is one that is accurate and helpful for the continued improvement and enhancement of the school.

The committee hereby expresses sincere gratitude to the faculty, staff and students at St. Thomas Aquinas School for the opportunity to serve on the visiting team and for the many kindnesses shown to us during our visit. Each of us on the committee has grown as a result of the experience.

This school obviously is a quality school. This was reflected not only in your self-study, but also in the comments and observations of the visiting team. We were delighted with the whole climate of the school. The school speaks out for the Christian faith to the students and to the community very effectively.

This report is carefully written and includes specific recommendations, which should be considered seriously by the school and the supporting community. Not every suggestion needs to be followed, but each should be considered.

The content of the self-study was divided proportionately among the members of the accreditation team. This report has been written by the team as a whole, with only minor editing done by the team chairperson. Each part of this report follows the following format.

- Overview:** This provides an introduction and a few observations in general terms about that particular aspect of the school program.
- Strengths:** These are the most obvious strengths of the topic.
- Concerns:** The committee felt that the school should be aware of these items. They may not be weaknesses, but they gave members of the committee some concern.
- Recommendations:** Wherever possible, specific, practical suggestions have been made to help to remedy the concerns expressed.

The visiting team pledges its continued support and assistance should you care to call upon any of us in the implementation process.

May the Lord richly bless the faculty and constituents of this school so that with the Lord's help all will continue to proclaim His Gospel evermore effectively as a result of this process.

Sincerely,

Team Chairperson

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Visiting Team, along with Fr. Steven Mattson, Superintendent of the Diocese of Lansing Catholic Schools, would like to express our appreciation to, Frank Sander, Principal, and Fr. Mark Ingot, Pastor, and the members of the St. Thomas Aquinas Education Commission for their commitment in coordinating the completion of the Self-Study, as well as the entire site visit. In addition, the Team acknowledges and thanks the teachers, secretaries, support staff and parents for their valuable contributions to the accreditation effort and their hospitality during our visit.

STANDARD I: PHILOSOPHY / MISSION STATEMENT

OVERVIEW

The philosophy/ mission statement focuses on the development of the whole child in a Catholic environment. The school promotes respect and understanding of each other present in this Christ-centered community, with the focus solely on the benefit of forming the students into disciples of Christ.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- The Mission Statement is well-written. The Mission Statement contains what St. Thomas Aquinas School seeks to do, for whom it seeks to serve and how it serves St. Thomas students. It was revised in May 2013 for greater clarity. (O, S, I)
- St. Thomas the Aquinas School continually seeks to improve their education and extra-curricular programs to reflect their mission Statement. (S, I)

CONCERNS

- At the present time there is no Philosophy Statement. (O, S)
- With several new staff members it will be important to include them in the reflection and evaluation process; it will take a conscious effort to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a Philosophy Statement with school community to provide guiding principles that leads to accomplishing the mission.
- Continue to find ways to bring the Mission Statement to life in the school, its students, staff and families.
- Display the statement in the hallways, classrooms and on school materials that go out to the school and greater community.

STANDARD II: SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

OVERVIEW

St. Thomas has been through many transitions involving staff turnover. Despite these transitions, they have been able to maintain stability. Staff morale is high and parents seem to be happy with the direction of the school under the new administration. Shared time teachers are happy to work at the school.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- The school has a strong positive staff. (S, I, O, W)
- The school is in a good location near Michigan State University. (O, W)
- The families are advocates of the school and generations continue to attend and support the school. (I, O, W)
- Administration and Parish include stakeholders in decision making through the PEC, Parish Education Council. (S, W)
- There is excellent communication throughout the school via Ed Line, newsletters, classroom blogs, etc... (O, W)
- The school has an excellent reputation in the community. (I, W)
- School Developed a Family Covenant which outlines expectations from parents. It is required that this document is signed and turned in each year. (W, S)

CONCERNS

- School security is a concern; guests sign in and out but do not always put badges on and secretary is not always aware of who is coming and going. Tunnel connecting school and parish make the school vulnerable. All of the staff do not wear their ID's, including the principal. (O, I)
- There has been much staff turnover including administration. (O, W)
- Classroom management is a concern in some classrooms. There is not an established school wide discipline policy that is followed by all staff. (O, W)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assess vulnerable areas of the school and secure them during school hours.
- Require everyone to wear identification when in the school, guests and staff.
- Give staff encouragement and acknowledge achievements wherever possible in an effort to retain them.
- Adopt an established discipline philosophy that all teachers are comfortable with and enforce it. One that is widely used throughout the diocese is Virtue-based, restorative discipline.
- Assign teacher mentors to new teachers in the building.

IF THIS SCHOOL IS BEING RE-ACCREDITED

- It was noted in the self- study that the school/church had combined with St. John Student Parish. However, this change did not seem to affect the school in any way that was observed or noted during this visit.
- There was an indication that a parent group had been formed to discuss the concerns regarding the math program. Although it appears to be common knowledge that there are concerns regarding the math program, it was not observed under this standard during this visit.

RESPONSE:

1. *The tunnel between the church and school is now closed and locked except on days when Mass is taking place.*
2. *The discipline policy has been updated for 4-8th grades. The Education in Virtues program has been implemented to help our students understand how living virtuous lives leads to better behavior and a closer relationship with Jesus.*
3. *New teachers to St. Thomas are always assigned mentors from the teaching staff to help them with their transition to the school. These are usually their grade level partners who they meet with initially on a weekly basis, then monthly during the course of their first year.*

STANDARD III: SCHOOL CLIMATE

OVERVIEW

St. Thomas provides a supportive climate where students, parents, administration, and staff work together to create a community of learners. This is apparent from the variety of programs and supports that are in place for students and teachers alike.

(**S** = self-study report, **I** = interview, **O** = observation, **W** = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- The introduction of the family covenant is a formidable tool to remind parents and school that the forming of their child(ren) is a team effort. (S, I, W)
- Adding a reading interventionist (especially Ms. Dillon) can only prove strong benefits especially as the years go on. (S, O)
- The presence of adults and Michigan State University students present in the school as mentors is a wonderful benefit. (S, I, O)
- St. Thomas provides a number of ways to reach children on the higher end of the spectrum as well through the variety of opportunities present in the East Lansing/Michigan State University community. (S, I, O)
- A strong presence of pastoral staff in the school has proven to be a unifying factor. This is evident in speaking to staff, students and parents. (S, I, O)
- The “houses” approach in the middle school has built a community within a community. (S, I, O)
- With the number of changes in leadership over the last few years, the staff is committed to the larger goal of forming the child. Staff is united in this most important goal. (I, O)
- The school provides a number of opportunities within the school year that enrich students such as the “Big” lessons, Washington DC, 7th grade camp in Leelanau etc. (S, W)

CONCERNS

- With the merging of two parishes and the lack of stability in leadership, St. Thomas is in a precarious position as it faces the future. (S, I)
- Consistency in decisions regarding discipline will be most important. (S, I)
- Developing a consistent framework or philosophy that teachers, parents, and students are taught and use as a community would prove to be beneficial. (S, I, O)
- Raising the bar in regards to consistency in uniform and behavior will prove beneficial over time. (S, I, O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- As administration remains stable, much of the concern in this standard will be taken care of as time and consistency in decision will unify this community.
- Educate teachers, students, and parents in the expectations of the school uniform and behavior expectations in the classroom, hallway, lunchroom, Mass, and recess with the expectation that all staff will hold students to the same level.

RESPONSE:

1. *A math consultant has been added to our staff to assist the school in doing curriculum realignment as well as introducing new ways of instruction in the classroom. This gives our teachers a consistent educational philosophy to use in two of our more important academic areas. The assistance from these academic advisors in both the area of math and reading is a huge advantage for our teachers.*
2. *The family covenant has caught on even more so in the second year of its implementation with 30 more families returning them than had done so the previous year. This seems to indicate a great awareness and buy-in to shared expectations of the school and family community.*

STANDARD IV: ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION

OVERVIEW

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School is a warm, nurturing community of faith. The administrative staff is competent, qualified, and effective in continuing the success of the school's daily operations and the long term vision that is in the process of being achieved.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- The new principal is a welcomed asset to the school. His calm demeanor and ability to form relationships with parents and other stakeholders has allowed him to effectively take the lead in a short amount of time. (S, I, O)
- The pastor is very committed to Catholic education, and he and the principal have effective, regular communication. (I, O)
- The PEC advisory group is very active and effectively provides consultation to the principal and pastor. (S, I)
- The front office staff works cohesively with the principal to ensure that communication gets to parents effectively. (I, O, W)

CONCERNS

- The dispensing of medication to students may not be meeting state requirements. (I, O)
- There is a lack of communication at times between the school staff and the principal. It can seem like the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. (I, O, W)
- With so many new staff members this year, it is not clear whether they are all 100% enculturated into the St. Thomas community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Examine current practices regarding medication dispensing with the laws governing this in the State of Michigan and ensure that the school is in full compliance.
- Consider creating a common calendar where the faculty and staff can upload schedule dates on it and that it is seen by everyone.

- Create more opportunities for new staff members to work alongside veteran staff members in order to better understand the legacy of excellence for which St. Thomas has always been known.

RESPONSE:

1. *Medications are being dispensed according to Michigan law ensuring compliance in this area. Parents need to sign a permission form for school personnel to distribute meds. The school needs to have the doctor's prescription to give the medication. Medications are kept in a locked cabinet unless being distributed.*

STANDARD V: PROFESSIONAL STAFF

OVERVIEW

The staff is dedicated and constant in their support for one another. They participate in spiritual and professional activities to foster personal growth as well as school progress. These activities help the school in their continued efforts to nurture each child. They are challenged to maintain a professional development to benefit the whole faculty as well as utilize the veteran teachers for formation of the beginning teachers and participation in leadership roles in the school.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observations, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- There is a strong camaraderie amongst the teaching staff. (O)
- The staff works well together to plan events for the school or individual students. (I)
- Prayer times are offered for the staff to pray together. (I)
- Time is set aside at staff meeting time for professional development and grade level meetings. (I, S)

CONCERNS

- The mentoring program is not meeting the needs for new teachers (O, S, I)
- Utilize the professional development meeting time to implement a professional development plan that involves bringing to the faculty experts who can help them implement behavior management strategies, fine tune teaching skills or increase their skills with the assessment of students. (I, S, W)
- There is a lack of opportunity for the veteran teachers to lead school initiatives or events. (S, W)
- Currently there is no process for teachers to offer and implement suggestions for professional development. (S, I)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In addition to the initial meeting with a mentor, plan that the beginning teacher have a bi-weekly meeting over lunch to discuss common topics such as evaluation process, differentiation in teaching, classroom behavior management, time management, etc.
- Survey staff to find out four desirable topics for professional development. Have a

veteran staff person research and locate an expert on the topic who can come to present the topic on a staff meeting date or records date or the days prior to Labor day. Reward their efforts with chocolate, praise and lots of encouragement.

- Have the veteran teachers take turns to lead a topic over lunch with the beginning teachers. Keep a calendar in the staff lounge so they can see upcoming dates with the topics.

RESPONSE:

1. *Mentors and Mentees meet weekly the first month of a teacher's employment, then at least once a month after that, or as needed.*
2. *Teachers are invited, and encouraged, to offer suggestions for professional development. Teachers meet three times a month to discuss issues having to do with curriculum, instruction, and, virtue development.*

STANDARD VI: ELEMENTARY CURRICULUM AND PUPIL EVALUATION

OVERVIEW

Curriculum - A

The staff works together to ensure that the curriculum is cohesive and builds year to year. The school follows the Diocese of Lansing curriculum guidelines

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Timeline is in place to evaluate and revise each subject area. (S, O)
- Curriculum is present for each subject level and grade level. (S, O)
- Multiple real-world opportunities exist for students. (S, I)
- Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies, innovations and activities that are research based and reflect best practices. (S, I, O)

CONCERNS

- Review of the Mathematics Curriculum is in progress/needed to better meet the needs of all students. (S, I)
- Social Studies Curriculum needs both materials and alignment. (S, I)
- Professional Development is needed for all teachers in all areas of curriculum. (S, I)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a math council to evaluate current mathematics curriculum, materials and practices.
- Update Social Studies materials; consider web based materials.
- Increase curriculum Professional Development opportunities for all teachers.

RESPONSE:

1. *The math curriculum has been reviewed and revised as of August of 2014. The new documents were distributed to all teachers who instruct in math. Our math consultant is currently working to help with the implementation of these changes so that they are done consistently and with fidelity.*
2. *A math council was in place in 2013-14 to identify the areas of math where students were underperforming.*
3. *Teachers receive monthly professional development in reading and math instruction; as well as taking time to learn how to teach about virtues to students K-8.*

STANDARD VI: ELEMENTARY CURRICULUM AND PUPIL EVALUATION

OVERVIEW

Assessment - B

The school is currently using a wide variety of assessment tools to allow for measured student success.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- The new Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) will be given to students at the beginning and end of the year. (S, I)
- Wide-range of summative and formative assessments is given to the students. (S, I, O)

CONCERN

- Lack of time that the staff has to review, interpret, and implement data from the assessments that are given. (S, I)

RECOMMENDATION

- Provide professional development for all teachers about interpreting and differentiating instruction based on assessment data.

RESPONSE:

1. *Our curriculum director has taken time with teachers to explain how to read and interpret both the NWEA-MAP standardized results, as well as use the accompanying Descartes scales to determine instruction based upon student need. A continuing goal is for teachers to take time to reflect on these results as to how it applies to their teaching and help it inform their instruction moving forward.*

OVERVIEW: (RELIGIOUS EDUCATION [Diocese of Lansing Addendum] Grades K-8)

The religion curriculum is well-written and the objectives are clearly defined. The school utilizes USCCB approved texts for all grades (K-8) and the upper school classes use Youcat (Youth Catechism) and the Bible as supplemental materials. The highly qualified upper level religion team is a tremendous bonus for the school. The religion curriculum is comprehensive,

but the school could make more of an effort to disseminate it throughout the various subject areas.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written recommendation)

STRENGTHS

- Curriculum reflects the mission statement of the school. (S, I, O, W)
- Curriculum weaves the beauty of the faith into all areas of student life. (S, W)
- The use of technology to deliver content is evident. (S, O, W)
- Some very knowledgeable teachers. (S, I, O)
- Faith element very prominent in the school environment. (S, I, O, W)

CONCERNS

- The religion schedule, in terms of the times that it is offered, is inconsistent, which is not ideal for instruction.
- More teachers ought to hold the advanced catechetical certification.
- The Family Life program is good but appears incomplete.
- Catholic faith could be more organically integrated into all subject areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Work to establish a more consistent religion schedule.
- Make it a high priority to have all teachers achieve advanced catechetical certification.
- Purchase a Family Life program that fully incorporates the comprehensive teaching of the Catholic faith.
- Offer professional development opportunities to foster in teachers an ability to integrate the faith in all areas of the curriculum.

RESPONSE:

1. *New teachers are given Catechetical training each summer as part of their back-to-school inservice time.*
2. *Our Religion teachers are trained in the Theology of the Body curriculum to be taught with students in the middle school grades.*

OVERVIEW: (SOCIAL STUDIES Grades K-8)

The standards for Social Studies have been met by St. Thomas Aquinas. The Social Studies classes observed demonstrated students engaged in the learning process. Technology was being used by teachers. Students were asked to recall information as well as to analyze and compare information or situations to make new connections. Faith was also incorporated within these lessons. Some classrooms had evidence of learning displayed. The curriculum provided in the self study is very complete, but there is some question as to whether these standards are being followed. It does not seem that Social Studies is being taught on a regular basis in the lower elementary classes, especially K-3. Only one teacher in the third grade is in compliance with the diocesan time allotments. There does not seem to be adequate materials to support the instruction of Social Studies in the lower grades. One teacher was observed using Time for Kids

and some textbooks were available in the second grade classroom. Grades 4-8 provide instruction on a regular basis and are somewhat in compliance with the diocesan time allotments.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Use of SMART boards, maps, and other instructional materials observed. (S, I, O, W)
- Faith incorporated in lessons observed. (S, O)
- Students engaged in critical thinking skills. (S, O)
- Fully developed written curriculum. (S, W)
- Library theme makes a wonderful connection to Social Studies. (O, I)

CONCERNS

- Lack of materials for the lower elementary grades. (S, O, W)
- Out-of-date textbooks in grades 4 and 5. (S, O, W)
- Time allotments are not being met. (O, W)
- Very little evidence of learning within this subject present in hallways or classrooms. (O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Time allotments need to be reviewed for all grades and schedule adjustments need to be made.
- Written curriculum needs to be reviewed by all teachers to insure that it is being followed.
- Incorporation of technology for students to use would benefit instruction.
- Instructional materials and/or textbooks need to be available and/or updated for grades K-5.

FOR SCHOOLS THAT ARE SEEKING RE-ACCREDITATION

- St. Thomas Aquinas has documented growth between the previous self-study/annual reports and the current self-study. The specific statements of growth provided are present within the math program and curriculum.

OVERVIEW: (LANGUAGE ARTS Grades K-8)

The Language Arts program is sequential and aligned to the Common Core, diocesan, state and national standards.

Best practice examples of teaching were evident in all classrooms, including but not limited to:

- anchor charts for both reading and writing strategies
- individual, small and large group instruction
- book clubs, literature circles
- writers workshop, collaborative writing
- various opportunities to verbally use communication skills

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Students are encouraged to read at their independent level and are instructed at the instructional level as determined by the teacher, with the support of the Reading Specialist. (O)
- Consistent use in K-3 of the Vocabulary, Making Meaning and Lucy Calkins programs. (I, O)
- Availability of the Accelerated Reading Program on a weekly basis. (I, O)

CONCERNS

- None

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Common classroom assessment tools to guide instruction and give staff a benchmark for progress.
- Ongoing staff in service and Professional Development for Language Arts.
- In service to train volunteers to support staff in tutoring and progress monitoring students in Language Arts, including Reading, Writing and Speaking.
- Adding more materials for all grade levels – Leveled Reading books for lower El., literature for Middle School.

RESPONSE:

1. *NWEA-MAP is helping with providing common classroom assessment tools to guide instruction to give staff a benchmark for progress.*
2. *Our reading consultant has hired an assistant to help support the reading programs by providing tutoring and monitoring student progress in reading.*

OVERVIEW: (FOREIGN LANGUAGE Grades K-8)

The Spanish program is made possible through a *shared time* teacher.

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STRENGTHS

- The teacher is talented and enthusiastic. (I,O)
- Spanish is offered across all grade levels. (S, I)
- A curriculum has been written by the current Spanish teacher. (S)

CONCERNS

- Out of date (10 year old) text books. (S)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to take advantage of the shared time option regarding Spanish at St. Thomas.
- Consider updating middle school textbooks to correlate with High School textbooks students may use when they leave St. Thomas.

OVERVIEW: (MATHEMATICS Grades K-8)

The standards for Mathematics have been met by St. Thomas Aquinas. Many classrooms of a variety of grade levels were observed during math instruction. Teachers were engaging students in a variety of activities. Manipulatives, SMART boards, and some technology were being used as instructional strategies. Many teachers were engaging students in meaningful discussions

about math and asking students to explain how they reached solutions, or asking students to offer proof behind the concepts. Critical thinking and reasoning skills were a focus on the elementary math lessons observed. Many different math concepts were being used outside of the standard being addressed. Students were involved in estimation skills as well as other basic concepts learned previously. Whole group instruction, independent practice, and group/team work were all observed. Some teachers were monitoring the work of students and offering assistance when needed.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Variety of instructional strategies and practices to deliver math curriculum. (S, I, O, W)
- Hands-on learning, not textbook learning. Creative lesson plans for students to explore math concepts. (O, W)
- Newer up-to-date textbooks. Same series used across the grade level. (S, O)
- Mad Math, X-tra Math, Flash Master, Simple Solutions (3rd grade) resources being used in the elementary classrooms to develop computational skills. (S, I, O, W)
- Classrooms had visuals to help remind and reinforce mathematical concepts. (O)

CONCERNS

- MAP testing scores at the middle school level are very low. (S)
- Differentiated instruction not observed. All students were doing the same lesson. (O, W)
- Diocesan time allotments are not being met for first and second grade. (S, W)
- School wide concern regarding the math curriculum. (S, I, W)
- Limited access to computers within the classrooms. (O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase time allotments for first and second grade math to 50 minutes per day every day. This complies with the Diocesan requirements.
- Strategies for math instruction for the elementary grades need to extend to the middle school. Review of basic computation, critical thinking skills, estimation, logical thinking and problem solving should be reinforced at all levels.
- The school needs to look at differentiated instruction for math instruction.

- Incorporation of technology into the math curriculum and instruction would benefit students.
- In depth evaluation into student math achievement at the middle school level and an action plan to increase student performance.
- There is a reference to Social Studies within the Mathematics standard within the report.

FOR SCHOOLS THAT ARE SEEKING RE-ACCREDITATION

St. Thomas Aquinas has documented growth between the previous self-study/annual reports and the current self study. The specific statements of growth provided are present within the math program and curriculum.

RESPONSE:

1. *The 2014 Faith and Fundamentals Fund-A-Need is being designated to provide additional technology for students by purchasing i-Pads for each elementary classroom.*
2. *Time allotments in math have been adjusted to meet the diocesan standards for math instruction.*
3. *Forming a math council, reviewing math curriculum, and, reassigning staff have helped to deal with areas of concern from a school community perspective. The implementation phase of these changes is taking place in 2014 with a review set to be done at the end of the school year.*

OVERVIEW: (SCIENCE AND HEALTH Grades K-8)

The science curriculum at St. Thomas Aquinas is alive and well. While science brings out the natural curiosity of children, the teachers do a wonderful job of taking that curiosity to provide a strong scientific base. Teachers indicated that materials are plentiful and they have wonderful opportunities for professional development.

(S = self - study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Students are conducting real research in the junior high. (S, I, O)
- Big Lessons that occur at Impression Five, Potter Park, and Fenner provide a strong science experience that teachers can continually refer to throughout the year and upcoming years. (S, I)
- Green Club is an excellent example of putting knowledge into action. (S, O)
- Leveled expository texts for science reading are beneficial for all students. (S)
- Use of technology in the science classroom is to be commended (digital projector, presentations). (O, I)
- Teacher attending the National Science Conference can only benefit the school. (I)

CONCERNS

- According to schedules few if any teachers are able to meet their time allotments for minutes put out by the diocese. (O, W)
- Gap in the standards between 4th and 5th grade. (S)
- Lack of faith being used in the science classrooms. (O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Analyze and fill in the gap in curriculum that exists between 4th and 5th grade. Look to the Next Generation standards to see if shifting topics among grade level could take care of this.
- Time should be taken from fine arts or elective classes in order to meet the time allotments.
- Science is the next best place for faith formation other than religion class. Make a deliberate attempt to find God in all we teach in science.

OVERVIEW: (FINE ARTS PROGRAM - Visual Arts & Music Grades K-8)

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

VISUAL ARTS:

STRENGTHS

- There is a written curriculum with well-defined sequential objectives/outcomes based on expectations including development of knowledge, skills and attitudes. (S, I, O)
- Ample class time is provided for students to work. (S, O, I)
- East Lansing Public School provides the teacher. The current Art Teacher has a Catholic

school background and is in her eighth year at St. Thomas Aquinas. (I, S)

- Strong ties with Michigan State University and City of East Lansing afford students many opportunities to enrich their art education. (S, I)

CONCERNS

- Art Teacher works from an art-cart. This has limitations and presents challenges for the teacher. There is storage and materials space provided but the lack of access to running water in the classroom and having to move materials from classroom to classroom poses challenges that a designated art room would remedy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Explore ways/means to provide a designated art room (with access to water).

Music

STRENGTHS

- Variety of music opportunities: vocal, instrumental, band, performance (S, I, O)
- Highly qualified music teacher. (S, I)

CONCERNS:

- Music classes are held on the stage with a curtain separating music and physical education classes. (S, I, O)

RECOMMENDATION:

- Explore ways/means to provide a designated Music Classroom.

RESPONSE:

1. *There has been a significant donation given to STA to be used to provide a space for Fine Arts to be taught in a separate, stand alone building. This will provide the teacher a "space" to be used to store equipment, have a kiln, and not have to travel from classroom to classroom.*

OVERVIEW: (PHYSICAL EDUCATION Grades K-8)

The Physical Education program is provided through shared time services with East Lansing Schools. The current teacher has been here for three years. The Preschool and Kindergarten

Physical Education program is conducted by a volunteer through a program called TNT which is a soccer program.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- The shared time teacher does a great job and enjoys working at St. Thomas. She has a well-developed curriculum with well written goals and objectives. She is prepared for each class and has a good relationship with the students. She conducts a well managed class. She is passionate about the subject area. (I, O)
- Consistency with this teacher is a definite plus to the program. (I, O)
- Space and equipment appear to be adequate. (I, O)

CONCERNS

- Due to the state guidelines, the shared time teacher from East Lansing is not permitted to teach preschool and Kindergarten. Preschool and Kindergarten are conducted by volunteers. Although the volunteers do a nice job, there is no formal curriculum or instruction. (W, I, O)
- The gym classes share the gym and are divided by a curtain. On the other side there is a band class which makes it difficult to give instruction. (O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make every effort to stay consistent with current shared time teacher.
- Investigate possibilities to hire a certified teacher for preschool and Kindergarten.
- Try to relocate the band class to another area or schedule them when physical education classes are not in session.

RESPONSE:

1. *We have reassigned staff so that now both of our pre-school classes and kindergarten classrooms receive physical education on a regular schedule throughout the week.*

OVERVIEW: (TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION Grades K-8)

St. Thomas has a lot of technology available to the school. They have SMART Boards, iPad cart and laptop cart, projectors, just to name a few. The computer teacher is new this year from Brighton shared time. She commutes from Warren and teaches at three other area schools. The teachers use much of the technology in their classrooms with students in addition to the computer classes that are held in the classrooms. There is no computer lab.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- There is a lot of technology available for classroom use. (O, W)
- Teachers are using technology appropriately and effectively in their classrooms. (O, W, S)
- Qualified computer teacher supplied by shared time program. (I)

CONCERNS

- There is no computer lab. (O, W)
- There are not enough iPads or laptops for some classes. (W)
- The Computer teacher only uses iPads. (O, I)
- Although there is a written curriculum in the self- study report, it does not appear to be followed by the shared time teacher. (O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assess space availability for location of computer lab with internet access.
- Use fundraising money for additional iPads and laptops to meet growing enrollment.
- Work with shared time supervisor to make sure curriculum is followed and all technology is being taught and used.
- Due to staff turnover, ongoing professional development should be offered.

RESPONSE:

1. *There will be an increase of i-Pads and tablets in the elementary classrooms. This will free up our mobile computer carts to be used almost exclusively in the middle school.*
2. *The school uses two qualified computer instructors now, one for elementary and one for middle school. This helps to provide each teacher more time to plan and instruct for a narrower group of students. This should improve the ability of teachers to provide specific, curriculum based instruction to the students.*

STANDARD VII: INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

OVERVIEW

St. Thomas has a wide variety of instructional materials and resources in place for the overall success of their students, to meet individual needs, and to enhance the faith centered curriculum. Instructional Materials and Resources support the curriculum and instructional programs of the school.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Making Meaning Reading Program (I, O)
- Leveled Readers for K-3 (I, O)
- New Vocabulary Program (I, O)
- Lucy Calkins Writing Program (I,O)
- The book room materials are convenient to the lower grades. (I, O)
- Classroom materials are labeled and easily accessed. (I, O)
- The library is well organized and administered. (I, O)
- Document cameras, Smartboards, Ipads and Laptops are utilized to support and enhance learning. (I, O)

CONCERNS

- None

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Additional Reading materials for the Book Room and Middle School Literature program.
- Increasing the Reading Specialist from half time to full time would provide more support for Literacy.
- Given the rapid increase in Technology and changes within it – funding to increase the number of devices and keep the materials current would be helpful. This could be accomplished through the St. Thomas Technology Fund, Faith and Fundamentals or the writing of outside grants.
- Apple TV's for the middle school classrooms would be a good resource.

RESPONSE:

1. *There will be an increase of i-Pads and tablets in the elementary classrooms. This will free up our mobile computer carts to be used almost exclusively in the middle school*

STANDARD VIII: STUDENT SERVICES

OVERVIEW

The services for identification and/or diagnosis of students of unique intellectual, physical, social, emotional or learning styles are of good quality and varied. There is a counselor and reading specialist available for the staff and accessible to parents in the service to the students. Establishing a protocol for acquiring the services to student is in the beginning stages. This is needed for both educational and health services including maintaining written policies and procedures that are both available, understood by all faculty and up to date.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Providing the 19 hours of school counselor who coordinates student evaluation and services to teach student self advocacy, organization, social skills and work habits. (I, S, W)
- Providing an expert literacy specialist who provides reading support for the entire school as well as staff training. (I, S)
- Opportunities for student participation in a variety of activities including services to the community, special interest groups and student achievement programs. (S, I)
- Collaboration with the surrounding university community to access programs beneficial to both the school and community. (S, W)

CONCERNS

- Lack of space for the specialist to work with students. (O, I, S)
- Staff trained to the protocol for accessing the counseling and reading services for the students. Middle school has a different process than the lower elementary. One process is needed to help coordinate and direct teachers to target appropriate services. The procedure needs to be in writing. Staff needs to be trained to provide ongoing support to student across the curriculum. (S, I, O, W)
- Teachers should be provided with direction and training for accommodations of students in the middle school across the curriculum. (I, S)
- A formal program to track progress of students and plan Response to Intervention program in the entire school. (I, W, S)
- Establishing a student council to allow students opportunity to exercise leadership and implement activities to enhance student body. (S, W)
- Establish a routine where two people observe and sign a record of student who is administered medications. (I, O)
- Ensure updated diocesan protocol for administration of medication at school. (I, O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In collaboration with ELP and counselor and reading specialist create a formal referral and intervention process that is posted in the teacher lounge, office and given to teacher while it is explained at a staff meeting.
- Ask EPL, reading specialist about having an expert come to share with staff regarding making accommodations in the classroom for students with varying learning needs.
- Start a list that is updated monthly on the progress of students with accommodations. It can be a quick half sheet with a 3-5 question checklist regarding the student's progress.
- Have a veteran teacher explore student council and put plans in place to initiate student council program next school year.

- Create a sheet to accommodate two staff who can initial when medications are administered in the school office.
- Provide updated copies of the diocesan policies for the health services in the building.

RESPONSE:

1. *A major change in staffing took place in 2014 in order that we might be able to provide a dedicated student service person to assist our middle school students. This person is in place to track and monitor students who have challenges academically or behaviorally. We have been working with the local public school to continue to monitor and provide assistance to students who need extra help.*
2. *Our social studies teacher is heading up a student council to provide a forum for students to express their voice and opinions about the school, and providing the opportunity to plan and implement activities for the student body.*

STANDARD IX: SCHOOL FACILITIES

OVERVIEW

St. Thomas Aquinas School is located in a wonderful position in East Lansing. Positioned close to parks, the local public high school and a Big Ten university proves to be beneficial. The school itself provides a great deal of green space for students and the community at large. Recent upgrades to the facility provide practical and visual benefits.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Security measures are to be commended. The addition of the door system and cameras in hallways with a tape life of about two weeks will prove to be beneficial throughout the years. (S, I, O)
- St. Thomas is situated on a beautiful plot of land that is utilized to provide students the opportunity to grow physically. The green space available is a wonderful asset to this school! (S, O)
- The upgrades to the kitchen, gyms and windows are wonderful. (S, I, O)

CONCERNS

- Drop off and pick up times at school provide difficult situations for parents, students, administration and staff. Parents crossing their children through the line of cars is dangerous. Also parents walking their students into the building can provide unnecessary distraction as the school day begins. (I, O)
- The tunnel between the school and parish offices is not supervised and unlocked during the school day. (O)
- The parking lot is in need of repair. (O)
- Making sure that custodial closets are locked during school hours. (O)
- Continue the care and concern for the asbestos in the building. (S, I, O)
- Chalk on building from childcare. (O)
- Plan for situation when there is a power outage. (S, I)
- Dedicated space for fine arts continues to be functional but not ideal. (S, I, O)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Have an outside source conduct a traffic study regarding drop off and pick up procedures. Provide parents with direction regarding times and locations of where students might be taken directly to their classrooms. May consider a location for staging students.
- Ensure that the tunnel is locked during the school day so that only parish personnel are able to access the school unannounced.
- Work with the parish to repair and resurface the parking lot.
- Consider options for fine arts space.

RESPONSE:

1. *The East Lansing Police department has visited the school in late Spring of 2014 to look over our pick-up and drop-off procedure. They made some recommendations as far as signage and painting that we have implemented. Otherwise, they thought the system worked.*
2. *The parking lot has been repaved and restriped as of August of 2014.*
3. *The tunnel is kept locked except for the times that students go to Mass on Wednesday and Friday and mornings.*
4. *Custodial closets are now being locked during the school day.*
5. *Custodial or administrative staff take part in an asbestos retraining seminar each summer hosted by the Diocese of Lansing.*

IX

STANDARD X: DEVELOPMENT, LONG RANGE PLANNING AND FINANCE

OVERVIEW

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Parish merged with St. John Student Parish to become St. Thomas Aquinas/St. John Student Parish five years ago. This major undertaking created the largest parish community in the diocese, and it has been implemented with a remarkably smooth transition. The pastor of this new parish wanted to hold off in creating a strategic plan for five years in order to “let the dust settle” into the new normal. He is now ready to undertake this important work.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- The school is very supported by the larger parish community. (S, I, O, W)
- The school has a well planned budget that is adhered to in order to remain financially vibrant as it moves forward. (I, O, W)
- The PEC provides counsel to the principal to help with marketing, fundraising, and enrollment management. (S, I)
- The school has successfully completed multiple phases of school improvements to the facility without accruing major debt. (S, I, O, W)

CONCERNS

- Currently there is no strategic plan in place for the school. (S, I, O, W)
- The PEC group is over taxed with the multiple demands being asked of them as an advisory board. (S, I)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A strategic plan needs to be created moving forward in order to move the school further in accomplishing its vision. This plan should involve members from the school community, and it should fold seamlessly into the overall parish strategic plan.
- The PEC group should create subcommittees in marketing, fundraising, and enrollment management. It would be helpful to avoid not having some parents serving in all capacities. There is no doubt that they may have the aptitude for this, but you don't want to cause burnout and lose their help in everything.

RESPONSE:

1. *There has been discussion amongst the Parent Education Council about using the accreditation report to build a strategic plan from.*
2. *The Parent Education Council has designated a person to be a marketing chair for the school. Ideas include producing a brochure/packet for new families, as well as securing trifold brochures that identify grade level curriculum, events, and materials lists.*

STANDARD XI: CHILD CARE

OVERVIEW

St. Thomas Aquinas Preschool appears to be a nurturing environment with dedicated teachers and staff. (S, I, O, W)

St. Thomas Aquinas Young 5 Program is an advantage to the school and benefit to the community. (I, O, W)

The Preschool PM Aftercare program is a seamless transition for children of working parents. (I, O, W)

(**S** = self-study report, **I** = interview, **O** = observation, **W** = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

Preschool:

- Highly qualified staff dedicated to developing students and preparing them for success in kindergarten and beyond. (S, I, O)
- The program includes a Young 5 option. These students also benefit from class time with a Spanish teacher. (S, I, O, W)
- A curriculum that reflects the developmental needs of 3, 4 and 5 year old children. (S, I, O, W)
- Enthusiastic support from both school and parish! (S, I, O)
- Collaboration between preschool staff, parents and kindergarten teachers regarding placement of students for the following year. (S, I, W)

Child Care:

- *Preschool PM Aftercare* appears to be a very helpful option for parents.
- Children move easily into a less structured, but carefully monitored environment where there are expectations and activities. Staff is familiar with each young student and there is a feeling of continuity and security. (S, I, O, W)
- *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare* is available for parents. (S, I, O, W)
- *Preschool-Grade 8 Before Care* is available but was not observed. (S, W)

CONCERNS

Preschool:

- None (S, I, O, W)

Child Care:

- There are different components as it relates to childcare at St. Thomas.
- *Preschool PM Aftercare* is separate from the other.
- 2 options (*Preschool-Grade 8 Before Care* and *Preschool – Grade 8 Aftercare*)
- *Preschool PM Aftercare* appears to function well.
- These preschool children transfer to *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare* when school dismisses. (S, I, O)
- *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare* warranted some concerns.

XI a

- Children in the homework room were talking on cell phones. This is allowed according to the staff member. (I, O)

- Children outside were climbing **in** the recycle dumpster. (I, O)
- Children were allowed to jump and play in the very muddy yard. (I, O)
- Personnel in charge did not seem alarmed about any of these situations. (I, O)
- Procedures involving movement of children in and out of the building with or without an adult seem to be vague. (I, O)
- There appears to be limited resources for children in *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare*. (S, I, O, W)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preschool:

- Continue to collect “hands on” materials to support theme development. Look for ways to store increased resources as the three programs grow and mature.
- Solidify theme development in each program.
- Display more significant religious (Catholic) symbols, etc.
- Follow up regarding the 3 year program moving to five days a week.

Child Care:

- *Preschool PM Aftercare* seems to function well.
- *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare* - Develop staff that understands **high expectations** are important and convey that message to the children in their care.
- Establish **clear guidelines** concerning appropriate behavior of students in the *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare* program.
- *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare* would benefit from a dedicated space. This would be an ideal.
- *Preschool-Grade 8 Aftercare* combines 3 year olds with 14 year olds. Some separation of ages would be helpful.
- Additional materials and storage space for these items would be an advantage.

IF THIS SCHOOL IS BEING RE-ACCREDITED

- The preschool program was not part of the previous accreditation.
- Clearly the preschool program is an asset to the school.

STANDARD XII – CATHOLIC IDENTITY

OVERVIEW

The school has made a clear effort to highlight the importance of the Catholic faith throughout the building. The faith is evident in the ubiquitous religious imagery in and around the school building. The importance of prayer is evident in the morning and end of day announcements.

The administrator's faithfulness is clearly reflected in his encounters with staff, students and parents.

(S = self-study report, I = interview, O = observation, W = written documentation)

STRENGTHS

- Prayer is a priority in the school.
- Each room has a prayer station.
- Religious imagery and symbols of the Catholic faith are present throughout the building.
- Students are encouraged to put their faith in action through service projects.

CONCERNS

- Not all staff members appear to be comfortable in expressing their faith.
- Though a behavioral program is in place, it would be ideal to incorporate a systematic virtues-based program.
- There appears to be a general lack of reverence during prayer times (e.g. parents, teachers and students talking and walking throughout the halls during school-wide morning prayers).
- The faith ought to be more comprehensively aligned throughout all subject areas of the curriculum.
- More emphasis on vocations would serve the community well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Offer religious professional development opportunities for the staff (in addition to catechetical requirements).
- Daily staff prayer at the end of the day.
- Put protocols in place regarding expected behavior when school wide prayer is in session.
- Be deliberate about integrating the faith into all elements of the curriculum.
- Invite individuals of various vocations to speak to the students.

RESPONSE:

1. *The principal is asking that one lesson observed each year be one having to do with religious education during the course of the school year.*
2. *The teachers are being asked to implement elements of the Education in Virtues program at least weekly in their classrooms and with their students.*

REPORT SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATION

The visiting team unanimously recommends that St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School in East Lansing, Michigan receive accreditation by the Michigan Nonpublic School Accrediting Association.

OUTSTANDING STRENGTHS

- There is a very strong Catholic culture evident throughout the school.
- The pastor is deeply committed to Catholic education at all levels.
- The reading specialist and the reading intervention program are absolutely outstanding, and they should be seen as a model for all Catholic schools.
- The reading month display in the library is exceptional, and the individuals involved should be commended for their care. This was remarkable to see.
- Although there is a tremendous amount of diversity in the building, St. Thomas is able to maintain a strong family, community environment.

MAJOR CONCERNS

- A strategic plan needs to be created and implemented for the long term viability of the school.
- The school needs to ensure that it is meeting the minute requirements in the various content areas as set forth by diocesan policy.
- With so many new staff members, not everyone is yet comfortable expressing confidence in faith integration. This is something that will take time, but we cannot just assume it will happen. These individuals will need to work towards catechist certification.

Respectfully submitted,



Sean Costello
Visiting Team Chairperson
April, 2014