



# **Executive Summary**

**Saint Thomas More Catholic School**

**Diocese of Raleigh School System**

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## **Introduction**

Every school has its own story to tell. The context in which teaching and learning takes place influences the processes and procedures by which the school makes decisions around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The context also impacts the way a school stays faithful to its vision. Many factors contribute to the overall narrative such as an identification of stakeholders, a description of stakeholder engagement, the trends and issues affecting the school, and the kinds of programs and services that a school implements to support student learning.

The purpose of the Executive Summary (ES) is to provide a school with an opportunity to describe in narrative form the strengths and challenges it encounters. By doing so, the public and members of the school community will have a more complete picture of how the school perceives itself and the process of self-reflection for continuous improvement. This summary is structured for the school to reflect on how it provides teaching and learning on a day to day basis.

## **Description of the School**

**Describe the school's size, community/communities, location, and changes it has experienced in the last three years. Include demographic information about the students, staff, and community at large. What unique features and challenges are associated with the community/communities the school serves?**

St. Thomas More Catholic School is an intrinsic part of the Catholic Community of St. Thomas More and its mission is to provide an education to each child in a God-centered environment. It exists to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, educating children and their families in the Catholic faith, while celebrating the diversity of all faith traditions. All are welcome to learn and worship. Established in 1964, St. Thomas More Catholic School is the only Catholic, co-educational school in Chapel Hill and Orange County. It is the local Catholic school option for families who attend three nearby diocesan parishes; aside from St. Thomas More - Newman Catholic Student Center Parish of Chapel Hill, Holy Infant Catholic Church, and Holy Family Parish in Hillsborough. Over the past ten years the school has consistently had 70-80% Catholic enrollment, the overwhelming majority coming from the largest and primary sponsor parish, the Catholic Community of St. Thomas More.

School families come from six different counties, but the great majority reside in the municipality of Chapel Hill. The current estimated population of Chapel Hill is over 57,000, representing a growth of nearly 4% since 2010. Chapel Hill is regarded as the most highly educated region in the state, tallying 73% of adults with a baccalaureate degree or higher. It also boasts high wealth; the 2010 census calculated the median family income at \$106,865, nearly twice the regional average of \$55,522. According to the most recent census, Chapel Hill is predominantly white (73%), followed by the designations of Asian and Pacific Islander (12%), Black (10%), and Hispanic (6.4%). The largest single employer is UNC-Chapel Hill, with a significant portion of the local population working at the university or in its hospital system. Other major employers include the Chapel Hill/Carrboro City Schools, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield of North Carolina. The religious orientation of the area is varied, and includes the following houses of worship: Baptist, Catholic, Episcopalian, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Mormon, Presbyterian, and non-denominational Christian.

Recent estimates show a significant influx of Hispanic families into surrounding Orange County since the last census, as indicated by parish registrations, as well as the independent Orange County reports. Since 2000, the number of Hispanic residents has more than doubled, moving from 4% of the total population to over 8% by recent estimates through Catholic Charities and a local chapter of El Centro Hispano. Of the registered households within the St. Thomas More Catholic Community, nearly half self-identify as having Hispanic origin. The number of Hispanic school-aged children within the parish recently surpassed the number of white school-aged children.

The demographics of the school staff and student body are not as diverse, but they are becoming more so. Designed to serve 483 students at capacity from 3 years old through 8th grade, the total enrollment of STM for 2015-16 is 434. The running average attendance over the past ten years is 427, just under 90% capacity. During our last accreditation, the non-white population of students was less than 10%, Hispanic being the primary non-white population. Currently, 48 (11%) of our 434 students self-identify as non-white Hispanic, and another 30 (7%) identify as other non-Hispanic, non-white designations. The increase in Hispanic students can be attributed to intentional promotion of the school toward the parish Hispanic community, the application of Opportunity Scholarship Grants through the state of North Carolina, and expanded tuition assistance models.

Enrollment numbers have fluctuated significantly since the 2011 accreditation, with a low of 395 (2010-11) and a high of 460 (2014-15). The School Advisory Board and parish administration have studied these changes and attributed some of the larger gains and losses to national economic trends, increasing tuition, increasing availability and promotion of tuition assistance, positive/negative word of mouth (recently

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involving the non-rehiring of a popular middle school teacher), and a more inclusive educational model that includes higher resource and enrichment staffing. Even when totals do not rise or fall, turnover due to family relocation is a primary driver. This is a by-product of the high number of resident medical employees and other highly mobile professions.

Although tuition increases have slowed recently to just over 3%, cost has had a significant impact on school families and enrollment. In the past 14 years, most years have seen tuition increases of \$300+ with additional fees or collections for school and classroom materials, as well as athletics and field trip expenses. The tuition assistance programs currently help more than 90 children attend the school, made possible through the parish's generous subsidy to the school budget, contributions from the Home and School Association and the Diocese of Raleigh, end-of-year budget surpluses, and private donations.

The primary driver of tuition - 80% of our budgeted expenses - is compensation for a fully-licensed, tenured and expert staff, even at the preschool levels. Over half of the teachers have masters degrees, 1/3 have over 20 years of experience, and only four have less than 4 years of teaching experience. Since the last accreditation, there have been significant staffing increases:

- replacing a ½ position social worker to a ¾ position licensed counselor
- expanding nursing services from an RN with shortened days to a full-day licensed school nurse
- increasing resource/enrichment positions from one to 3.5
- hiring a full-time safety coordinator
- hiring a full-time curriculum coordinator
- hiring a full-time fifth-grade assistant
- hiring a full-time assistant principal for the middle school program and student services

STM's personnel demographics reveal that all but two staff members employed full-time are white, and all but five of the total full and part-time staff of 54 are women.

Unique challenges that have been identified are expansion and coordination of services for students with a broader range of learning styles and levels. Having more resource and enrichment staff is helpful, but the protocols and professional interactions that make up an integral student support service suite is new to many faculty.

Due to economic conditions created by national trends and increasing educational costs, there are fewer two-parent, single-income homes, so coordination and communication with parents is more difficult to accomplish. Support of the school in the form of time and talent is less frequent from households due to these pressures. Communications with homes where the primary language is not English is also a significant challenge that is now more common to each classroom with the increase in Hispanic families.

Additionally, as tuition increases (average annual increase is >3% the last 10 years) continue to outpace cost of living and local average household income gains, more financial pressures will impact families and resources will be strained within the school budget and the financial assistance resource base.

There is increasing tension between the mission to be a school that is financially accessible to any parishioner, and to maintain high quality in all programming. There is a significant cost associated with the individualized and sophisticated service expectations of the local culture. Highly-educated parents, living within a public school-system heralded as the best in North Carolina, demand a high level of responsiveness and customer service on top of excellent academic programming. There is high concern and even anxiety regarding math instruction as it is a significant placement indicator for students graduating from STM to attend any one of the 12 high schools that service these families. It is expected that the school will recruit and retain teachers with the same level of tenure and expertise as our surrounding schools, even though our tuition revenue can only support a base salary scale that lags behind area public and private schools by anywhere from 5% - 20%.

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St. Thomas More Catholic School succeeds through the extraordinary passion and efforts of its teachers, parents and administrators, who see high value in Catholic schooling.

## **School's Purpose**

**Provide the school's purpose statement and ancillary content such as mission, vision, values, and/or beliefs. Describe how the school embodies its purpose through its program offerings and expectations for students.**

It is the declared mission of St. Thomas More Catholic School to "provide an education for each child in a God-centered environment". An atmosphere of faith is the setting where Catholic values are modeled and lived, and each student is recognized as a unique individual who learns in his or her own way. In perpetuating its mission, the stakeholders of St. Thomas More Catholic School hold firm to six core beliefs, cited and summarized below.

- The principles of Catholic Christianity are the basis of our existence.

The curriculum of St. Thomas More Catholic School, a curriculum established and regularly updated by the Diocese of Raleigh, includes religion as a core subject. The teachings and practices of the Catholic Church are followed. Mass is celebrated by the entire student body each Friday; liturgical seasons and religious holidays are recognized and celebrated, and Catholic values are evident in intangible and tangible ways, as they inform school policies and add to school atmosphere.

- Parents are considered to be the primary educators of their child's spiritual, emotional, and educational development.

Parents are valued for the role they play in their children's education and in the school environment. Opportunities for parent involvement in the classroom and in school-related initiatives (such as fundraisers, school social events, extracurricular clubs and activities, and sports teams) abound. Parental involvement is encouraged, recognized, and celebrated.

- Students should be respected as individuals who learn differently.

Teachers are conscious of differences in individual students' learning styles, and vary instruction in an effort to reach all modalities. Assessments are not limited to pencil/pen and paper evaluation tools; students can also demonstrate their knowledge and abilities through hands-on projects and presentations. Technology is often incorporated to enhance instruction, or as a means of sharing student work. Student accomplishments in classes beyond the core curriculum are recognized and celebrated as well.

- Teachers' reasonable expectations guide students toward developing responsibility, self-discipline, creativity, and compassion.

Teachers' focus at STM extends beyond the curricular matter. The opportunity to infuse Catholic values into all subject areas guides students toward responsibility for themselves and compassion for others inside and outside the classroom. Students are encouraged to express themselves, to recognize the gifts God has given them, and to use their creative abilities to show what they know and who they are.

- Students learn to value the ministry of community service.

Recognizing the call to service that is at the heart of Catholic social teaching, STM faculty, staff, and students contribute to the STM community, to the community-at-large, and to those in need in this nation and beyond. All classes are involved in individual, class or school-wide community service projects throughout the school year. Annually, the school has partnered with food banks, care facilities, Habitat for Humanity, local Special Olympics teams, clothing drives, funding collections for disasters through Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services, animal shelters, regional communities (Appalachia), foreign communities (Arenal, Nicaragua), parish ministries (Knights of Columbus), Catholic Charities, and many others.

- Education encourages parents, teachers, and students to be life-long learners.

Education is not limited to the classroom setting. Students are encouraged to be involved in enrichment activities, available through or shared

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by STM. Adults also model ongoing learning. Faculty and staff regularly engage in on-site professional development, as well as workshops available through the Diocese of Raleigh, and at local schools, colleges and universities, and bring back what they have learned, sharing it with the students via new classroom practices. Occasional parent education opportunities are offered through the school as well, addressing such topics as adolescence, parenting, and Internet safety. In addition, local speakers of interest and area workshop information are shared with parents.

NOTABLE END COMMENT: Through the preparation toward accreditation this year, many staff members have remarked on the lack of recognition within our mission statement or beliefs about technology or other modern advances, and how we support our students and families in their efforts to embrace these changes.



## **Notable Achievements and Areas of Improvement**

**Describe the school's notable achievements and areas of improvement in the last three years. Additionally, describe areas for improvement that the school is striving to achieve in the next three years.**

In 2013 St. Thomas More Celebrated its 50th anniversary, opening its doors to another academic year. The celebration was lively and entertaining, providing events and opportunities for all stakeholders. Money was raised to fund a needy student's full year's tuition, a \$2000 donation to Habitat for Humanity, commemorative trees planted, and bricks laid in a sidewalk. There were visits from past staff and students - even the school's very first principal. Over 2500 names and contact information were amassed to generate a starting point for more development and advancement through alumni communications and support.

The following represent measurable and evident enhancements, achievements, and areas of improvement from January 2013 to the present. Many of these were the direct result of the school improvement plan generated as a result of the school's 2011 accreditation process.

### Academics:

- Assessment data from IOWA tests now can generate longitudinal data on specific students to track progress from year to year. 2015 is the second year of data for this analysis.
  - Teachers now use AIMSWeb in the elementary school to map academic skills over the course of the year.
  - Grades 4-8 have begun identifying curricular junctures between the math and science curricula where coordinated STEM learning experiences can replace separate, traditional math/science lessons.
- Independent tutorial/instructional software - Spelling City, Reflex Math - has been reviewed, evaluated, and applied across several more grade levels.
- Scholastic competitions have been enhanced and expanded by introducing middle school and elementary Science Olympiad teams, and joining the Catholic Math League competition
  - Dedicated family evening activities called "Curriculum Knights" to celebrate Math (2014) and ELA (2015) were instituted.
  - The school continues to produce Spelling Bee and Geography Bee finalists who go on to larger competitions.
  - After training all teachers with wetland curricula, grant monies have provided improvements to our constructed wetland on the property and students were able to create plantings and secure native species
  - Grant monies and private donations helped create a "Bird Garden." The efforts of a student generated club called the "Bird Club" coordinates the effort and continues to support the plantings there.
  - Grant monies have helped develop a cultivated vegetable/herb garden where students plant, care for, and harvest food to share with teachers, students, and parents.
  - Previously the MS schedule was driven entirely by the math ability grouped sections that stayed constant through the entire day schedule. Now the math grouping only affects one other section, and other subject areas can be grouped heterogeneously.

### Elective program:

- Students in the middle school have a broader selection of electives to choose from over their 12 elective slots that occur through three years in middle school.
- All 8th graders now graduate with CPR and AED training.
- Students in 7th and 8th who have proven proficiency in Spanish are now able to elect another language through Rosetta Stone.

### Technology:

- The wireless environment has been expanded to reach all classrooms.

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- Server capacity has been increased for safer file storage, more universal access, and more efficient technology management.
- A technology teacher has been reduced to a half teaching load to provide more time for technology support and training to school faculty and staff.
- A new, clearer, and more easily managed website has been installed in 2015.
- MSOffice 365 has been piloted by MS students.
- A "Bring Your Own Device" pilot has been utilized two times: one for an enrichment class of geometry two years ago, and one presently for students using assistive devices.
- Google apps suite has been applied in grades 3 through 8. Students manage documents, assignments, and submissions through it.
- Within three years, the number of mobile devices available to students went from 1 for every 10 students enrolled to 1 for every 5 students enrolled. I pads are used in primary grades, upper elementary students use I pads, Chromebooks and Lenovo laptops, and MS students use Lenovo laptops and MSSurface devices.

Family communication, engagement, involvement:

- In 2015 principals began sending home weekly, single page letters about schoolwide information and announcements entitled "More Notes," and the middle school added a page called "More from the Middle" specifically about grade 6-8 relevant items.
- Nearly all take home papers and forms are now sent home electronically each Wednesday through Renweb, the new student database and information management system.
- New online services provide real time grade reports, unit plans, and homework communications for students and parents.
- Elementary musical performances are provided both during and after school for parents who work and can't attend daytime performances.
- In 2015, parent conferences were moved to the fourth week of school to provide more two-way dialogue between parents and teachers on how the child learns rather than what the child has learned so far.
- All re-enrollment, registration, fees, tuition, and emergency information submission is done online.
- The aftercare program has dedicated staffing and time for a homework help session directly after school.
- Volunteer students and parents come after school to give specific homework help to students whose parents struggle with the English language at home, and hence, struggle to help them with English language homework. A translation email address was established and is manned by volunteers in order to provide a portal for English speakers to have a parent or community document translated into Spanish.
- The "Man-up" program encourages male school family members to volunteer an hour, a half day, or a whole day spending time with the students in the classrooms, hallways, and cafeteria, and especially on the playground.
- Family members, parishioners, members of staff and guests from the community are invited to the school to pay tribute to all men and women who serve or have served the country. This is done on or adjacent to Veterans Day.

Faith/Service/Catholic Identity:

- A student service leadership group fashioned after Honor Society - "Honorable Knights" - hosts a service fair each year where middle school students select a ministry or non-profit representative with whom to team
- MS students have enjoyed a retreat focused on their own spirituality, often hosted by returning HS students.
- The Crowning of Mary tradition was brought back as a school-wide event.
- The Our Lady of Guadalupe prayer service was added as a school-wide event coordinated with the parish's Hispanic community.
- An annual ministry that serves isolated, impoverished communities in Dingess, WV, has expanded from students and families filling shoeboxes to send to schoolchildren, to a parish-wide coordinated ministry that matches needy families with provisions such as Walmart gift cards, clothing, gifts, and food coupons. Children, staff members, and parishioners participate.
- MS students have teamed with the parish faith development youth program to adopt a family for Christmas. Several families within the school were anonymous recipients of this program.
- Significantly less paper is sent home now than three years ago in an effort to decrease waste and consumption.
- With help from the parish environmental stewardship ministry, the solid waste from the STM Hall where students eat was reduced 40% over

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three years.

- Last year MS students and staff began a custom of beginning each class period with prayer.

Athletics:

- The Knights of Columbus Free Throw Contests at the regional and local level feature our athletes each year.

- Girls volleyball brought the school its first female sport banner last year with an unbeaten regular season and a league runner-up finish in 2014.

- Club lacrosse was introduced.

- Cross country expanded over the last two years, placing two boys in the league's top ten finishers in 2015.

Extra-curricular activities:

- Student Council now includes representation for grades PreK through 8th grade on the council.

- A band assembled in 2013 has combined forces with other local Catholic schools for performances, and provided improvisational jazz during a special lunch.

- Students in the upper elementary grades perform in a choir that meets after school and has grown in numbers.

Professional support:

- The faculty admin team meets weekly with the administration, representing perspectives through three members, one each from the early grades, upper elementary grades, and middle school grades.

- Every two weeks professional learning teams meet. They are divided by grade - Preschool (teaching assistants included), K12 teachers, 345 teachers, 6th grade teachers, and 7/8 grade teaching team. There is also a PLT for specials teachers who span all grades. After a presentation by our assistant superintendent, and additional development of agendas and topics for the year, these PLTs are the arena for many professional topics. Staff members share student successes and instructional challenges, interface with the assigned resource/enrichment teacher for those grades, and explore special topics specific for those grade levels, like reviewing of instructional resources, application of instructional techniques, and broader mission-based questions that require stakeholder feedback.

The following issues and topics reflect areas that require improvement, and have been identified as goal targets for the next three years both through the accreditation self-evaluation, and existing initiatives that have been driven by other processes.

I. As support services have increased and a broader range of learners enroll in the school, teachers require more frequent professional development, not just on their classroom activities, but also the professional practices between educators that maximizes the impact of communication and coordination between student services and regular classroom teachers.

II. The high cost of technology improvements have prevented the school from installing robust capacity and access to keep pace with the increased number of users and mobile devices. This has been a "catch-up" item that will require more time and funding. Teachers are also pressed for time to acclimate to one new update/change to the technological offerings while being introduced to the next update/change. These rapid improvements are all upgrades from past practice, but have come too close to one another for proper and full implementation.

III. Teachers are asking for more protected, dedicated time that focuses just on the reflection, analysis, and retooling of their classroom practices. For instance, there has not been sufficient protected time for teachers to get together to go through all the information from the IOWA and Cogat assessments in an effort to make changes to curricular scope and sequence, or investigate new instructional strategies. Teachers also ask for more time to dialogue about instructional practice in order to learn from each other. So far the PLT time has been inadequate, taken over too often by logistical or programmatic details. A fuller, more instruction based professional development calendar, with direct input from instructional staff, would provide space, time and coordination for these efforts.

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IV. Administrative efforts have been consumed with new initiatives, upgrades and improvements, at the expense of vital professional dialogue with teachers on their own individual classroom skills. Administrators are not seen in the classrooms often enough, they don't provide frequent feedback to teachers on the work they are doing, and follow-through is scarce when new things are installed, hurrying instead to the next new thing. Teacher anxiety and exhaustion is at a high according to many who have been at the school for several years. Choosing fewer initiatives for each year and focusing on doing one or two things very thoroughly and completely is necessary.

V. Parents continue to seek communications from the school that will be more efficient, more timely, and more streamlined to their specific situation.

VI. The service model for younger children sometimes is beyond their ability to comprehend. Teachers and staff members are searching for service projects that engage young learners in a way that they experience first-hand the effect of their kindness.

## **Additional Information**

**Provide any additional information you would like to share with the public and community that were not prompted in the previous sections.**

There was one incident in particular that had an impact on the school community, and thus, on the collection of stakeholder feedback in preparation for our self-evaluation and re-accreditation. It is critical that any interpretation of surveys and feedback include knowledge of this incident and its effects.

In April of 2015 a middle school teacher asked families to meet with her off campus where she announced to attendees that she was being forced out, and that the administration was going to lie and say that she was retiring, among other things. What followed were family, parents, student and staff statements made formally and informally that the administration's agenda was purely economic, forcing out tenured teachers and replacing them with cheaper, younger teachers. This was the contention of a widely distributed petition presented to the parish administration.

Later in May when contracts were offered, that teacher was not offered a contract to return. Exit interviews and/or survey responses from several families made it clear that this particular incident was a part of the reason they were leaving.

The data from parent and student surveys reflects some of these feelings and beliefs, and unfortunately, replaced other comments they would have submitted otherwise to open-ended questions if they were not so upset over this issue. For example, over 25% of the open-ended responses on stakeholder surveys from middle school students included some mention of this teacher's departure.

Similar sentiments about losing teachers or pressure on staff were present in stakeholder feedback from teachers, inflaming formerly stated concerns over the rapid changes, the management of the changes, and the general feeling of "chaos" that this created. Last spring and this fall the administration worked together with the parish pastor and volunteers from the parish and school board to exhaustively examine administrative communications and school climate. This process is still underway and has resulted in many of the aforementioned improvements and areas identified that need improvement. The visiting accreditation team will recognize clearly the exceptional quality and legacy of our school, but will also see the wear and tear of an institution experiencing dizzying growth and change, some intended, and some undesirable. We remain a community united in our mission and goals, but divided in how to accomplish them.