



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY
FINAL REPORT

Date of Visit: Oct. 23, 2024

Principal: Terry Mulaney

Visiting Team Lead: Amy Nall, Assistant Superintendent

Visiting Team Members: Lara Krill, Principal St. Gabriel School; Carey Storner, Assistant Principal St. Michael School

In our commitment to authentic and sustained improvement, the Office of Catholic Schools has established an internal quality assurance process to support schools on their continuous improvement journey. The visiting team thanks the community of Ascension School for actively participating in the recent school support visit. The visit was designed to provide an insightful review of the school’s ongoing continuous improvement initiatives and their intended impact. The visiting team appreciates the school’s engagement in the process and offers their observations and feedback for the continued growth of Ascension School in each of the four domains of the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools: *Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership, Academic Excellence, and Operational Vitality.*

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS/OBSERVATIONS	
Teachers	19
Parents	6
Pastor	1
Administration/SLT	5
Classrooms Visited	13

Mission and Catholic Identity

School Goal -Implement new mission/vision statement- lived. Improve commitment to religion instruction and students in grades 5 and 8 score in 70% range in the areas of virtue and living discipleship ARK test in spring 2025

Aligned National Standards and Benchmarks for Excellent Catholic Schools:

1.4 The mission statement is visible in public places and contained in official documents.

2.1 Religious education curriculum and instruction facilitates an encounter with Jesus Christ that evangelizes and meets the religious education requirements and standards of the (arch)diocese.

The action steps to accomplish this goal were:

- Use of bulletin boards to reflect how students are living our mission. Mission printed throughout school. Making all visible changes (website, all printed materials and inside school).
- Work with Parish staff to better instruct religion classes as well as collaboratively approach all aspects of our religion curriculum including texts, service component and instruction.

School Support Team Findings and Feedback:

Every stakeholder interviewed was acutely aware of the new mission statement and appreciated the concise articulation of the mission of the school - developing CHRISTIAN THOUGHT LEADERS - several teachers referenced that it aligns with the “WWJD” idea of ensuring that all thoughts and actions should be processed through the Christian lens, and when that happens, each student has the opportunity to be a leader. It’s a Christian thought process that guides behavior. The School Board expressed gratitude for the new mission and how it is building community with all stakeholders. They noted that Fr. Robert and Mr. Mullaney worked together collaboratively and intentionally on the mission. The new mission statement seems to be driving the school’s Catholic identity priority. Teachers spoke about the shift in morale and the empowerment they feel which they attribute to the new mission statement. They felt that there is more parish involvement and excitement around the school.

Additionally, the school’s focus on the religion curriculum was mentioned by stakeholders. Special area teachers noted that not only is the mission statement being incorporated into all classes and subjects with intention but that the “Word of Life” program has facilitated the integration of religion into all subjects as well as standardized the content and approach. Additionally, the parish faith formation director teaching middle school religion is enhancing student learning and strengthening school-parish collaboration. Some teachers suggested the need for more professional development in religion instruction.

Parents expressed their feeling that the emphasis on religion was evident all the way down to preschool (former teacher comes in once a week to teach religion - which is now a “special.”) One parent talked about the students initiating prayer at a volleyball game and another said her daughter, unprompted, suggested they pray for the victims of the Hurricane while driving home. Another parent spoke of her preschooler talking about Jesus at home “You do unto others as they do do to us.” This, of course, aligns with curriculum implementation and Catholic identity.

An opportunity for the school is to continue to enhance the parish partnerships and to create opportunity for deeper Catholic connections. More deliberately focusing on Catholic identity not just Christian identity will ensure a commitment to the origin of the school and the rich Catholic heritage that forms the foundation for the community.

Governance and Leadership

School Goal: To establish our leadership team to rebuild/re-establish our PLC, PBL, formative assessment and differentiation strategies.

Aligned National Standards and Benchmarks for Excellent Catholic Schools:

6.4 The leader/leadership team establishes and supports networks of collaboration at all levels within the school community to advance excellence.

The action steps to accomplish this goal were:

- Meet with the leadership team once a month to establish PLC meeting topics for every Wednesday. Discuss important data from minutes of those meetings. Present findings to the entire faculty during monthly faculty meetings - data drive instructional practices. Weekly meeting topics will vary (PBL, formative assessment, MAP data, cohort, department).
- Faculty to meet, weekly, in various groupings to present data, discuss and document.

School Support Team Findings and Feedback:

A school leadership team has been clearly established with representation from administration, preschool, and teacher leaders. Choosing school improvement goals was a collaborative process between the school leadership team, school board, and teachers. The school leadership team tracks student progress and provides feedback to teachers. The school board and faculty members expressed their trust in the school leadership team. One teacher noted, “I feel valued and supported and pushed to be the best I can be.” Clearly the stakeholders were aligned in their priorities for continuous improvement.

The theme of reestablishing the systems and structures for teacher collaboration is clearly a priority. The PLC structure allows for collaboration around vertical alignment as well as for content-focused collaboration. The Leadership Team, with teacher feedback, refined the PLC format and template this year to enhance collaboration and focus on essential questions, specifically: “What

do you want students to know?" and "How will you know they have learned it?" The principal has prioritized differentiated instruction and formative assessments, with faculty meetings featuring professional development on both topics. Teachers collect intentional data using MAP, IXL, Dibels, and teacher-created assessments, charting benchmark data and utilizing progress monitoring to track student mastery. Classroom assistants attend PLC meetings, as they contribute to classroom support, and special area teachers provide additional support throughout the building. Ascension has implemented a unique, departmentalized schedule designed to meet student learning needs through intentional, specialized instruction. Leadership team members stated that teachers are adapting to the new reading curriculum, experimenting with adjustments to enhance differentiated instruction, with one leadership team member leading small groups weekly.

PLC meetings are held weekly on Wednesdays and follow a monthly rotation: Cohorts (K-2), Departments, Departments, and whole-staff meetings. During PLC meetings, teachers analyze and give feedback on lesson plans and formative assessments, using a structured approach with "Warm" (positive), "Cool" (questions or gaps), and "Cold" (challenges) feedback categories. Teachers actively participate in these discussions and adhere to established norms set at the beginning of the year, creating a collaborative environment that promotes continuous improvement.

Parents shared that they appreciate and value the collaborative efforts of the Ascension faculty. They said they understood the need for early dismissals (and noted that they probably could use more collaboration time) because collaboration is supporting their children's academic development.

The need for rebooting PBL was mentioned by many stakeholders. The team did see evidence of PBL in the Trivium classroom with the forensics unit. One teacher spoke about the mock congress simulation, and one teacher said she cannot even think about PBL because she is just trying to learn *Amplify*. Overall, using PBL more fully was identified as a desire. The commitment and alignment to school goals is evident in the collaborative structures established, so the time seems perfect for encouraging the PLCs to reengage in PBL by exploring cross-curricular opportunities for creative and innovative learning.

There is an opportunity to further incorporate walkthrough and observation data to track the success of strategy implementation, particularly differentiation, which was not regularly evident during the team's classroom visits. At this time, the school had limited walkthrough data, so the team would strongly suggest using the new instrument to provide the data they need to determine next steps for differentiation.

Academic Excellence

School Goal: Improve reading scores- each class to have 60-70% of students meeting projected growth in MAP reading by spring 2025. Using our PLC process to enhance differentiation, formative assessments, our SAP/SNP process and communication with parents, students with lower growth should have the resources to meet this goal.

Aligned National Standards and Benchmarks for Excellent Catholic Schools:

None listed in the plan

The action steps to accomplish this goal were:

- Amplify LA curriculum in all grades this year. All LA teachers trained in amplify and OG as well as DIBELS. Three independent reading assessments throughout the year. Teachers to use curriculum and assessments to track student progress and address needs to meet benchmarks.

School Support Team Findings and Feedback:

The reading goal was evident to all stakeholders, and the implementation of *Amplify* has been a heavy lift in the attainment of this goal, but one about which everyone seems excited. Teachers spoke of the focus on simply learning the new program before they could adapt and personalize it to the needs of their students. The K-2 teachers stated they liked the *Amplify* program because it offers two strands: Skills and Knowledge; Phonetic and Comprehension. They all agreed it builds literacy and content knowledge, and that social studies and science are built into the program. Teachers say it is very systematic, and they are already seeing a decrease in learning gaps. Orton-Gillingham correlates well with Amplify according to the Learning Coordinator. Several parents noted that they felt the implementation of *Amplify* has provided a more concrete curriculum, and they recognize that HOW reading is being taught is different and effective. In fact, several mentioned already seeing an improvement in their children's assessments. Parents even cited the OG training teachers received as aiding in their instructional practices. The teaching assistants mentioned that they saw their role as supporting the teacher while supporting students in individual work. In one classroom, the team observed a teaching assistant working at a back table individually with one student. Assistants said they were encouraged to participate in teacher professional development which helps them to be more effective in the support they offer. Parents also mentioned an appreciation for the implementation of *The Word of Life* curriculum.

Classroom visits found students respectful and engaged. A culture of learning was evident where students clearly knew the routines and expectations. In most classrooms, essential standards were posted and referred to in the lessons. Multi-sensory lessons as well as lessons requiring students to think critically and demonstrate depth of knowledge was evident in most classrooms. Differentiation was evident in some classrooms, but not all. Teachers were circulating and

providing feedback. Students were comfortable utilizing the physical space, and in several classrooms, they were seated around the classroom during small group work. Teachers were encouraging and affirming and promoted a growth mindset in their feedback to students.

There is great opportunity to continue to use the PLC structure and practices to build teacher capacity in lesson and assessment design. Developing best practices and targeted strategies for differentiation should continue to be a priority. Additionally, expanding the reading focus to all subjects would enhance this goal.

Operational Vitality

School Goal Update marketing materials

Aligned National Standards and Benchmarks for Excellent Catholic Schools:

13.1 The communications/marketing plan requires the school leader/leadership team and staff person(s) to ensure the implementation of contemporary strategies to reach targeted audiences, maintain communication outlets, serve all stakeholders, and provide data analysis.

The action steps to accomplish this goal were:

Identify all sources of marketing and determine the need for improvement - website update, open house folders and packet information, banners along roads as well as in school. Work with the School Board to improve open house marketing efforts from pre-event to post.

School Support Team Findings and Feedback:

The board said they determined a need to revitalize the marketing efforts to “get their name out there.” They said they believe that bringing parent perspective to the marketing efforts is essential and perhaps was a missed opportunity in the past. They said that there is not necessarily an overall vision for marketing, but they feel they are moving toward that. The first task was the *Open House* booklet. The brochure captures the Catholic identity and the academic excellence that are so apparent in the goals of the SIP and in the interviews with stakeholders. A few parents mentioned that they had encountered community members who either did not know Ascension School even existed or thought the school had closed. Overall, they felt that Ascension was a “best-kept secret” in the community.

The visiting team recognizes the opportunity to continue the promotional efforts of Ascension through the revitalization of the school website, highlighting the mission and the unique aspects of an Ascension education. Additionally, the leadership should continue broadcasting academic and extra-curricular successes through media outlets such as *The Record* and social media.

Summary

Ascension School stakeholders are aware of the school improvement plan and their respective roles in the implementation. These stakeholders are committed to the success of the school. They demonstrate dedication to the mission of the school and articulate the continuous support offered by a strong administrative team. Despite some of the challenges and changes in the past few years, stakeholders seem positive, and morale seems high. The community is clearly aligned in its commitment to offering students an excellent education focused on Christian leadership and academic excellence. Student classrooms reflected the culture and climate identified in the stakeholder interviews. The school culture will continue to be strengthened by the collective commitment to excellence, innovation and clear communication of goals.

The visiting team stands ready to support Ascension in their continuing efforts to improve as they provide each child with opportunities to grow spiritually, academically, emotionally, and socially.