

SAINT MARY CATHOLIC SCHOOL

110 ROBINWOOD DR. S.W.
FT. WALTON BEACH, FLORIDA 32548
(850) 243-8913 * FAX (850) 243-7895



Rev. Doug Halsema, Pastor
Mr. Peter Rodgers, Principal

July 19, 2022

Dear Saint Mary Catholic School Community,

Welcome to the 2022-2023 school year! I hope this letter finds you all well rested and enjoying some quality time together with family and friends. I am thrilled to begin my leadership tenure at Saint Mary Catholic School (SMCS), but also, and more importantly, to belong to such a kind and supportive community. I want to thank Fr. Halsema for placing his trust in me. I also want to thank my predecessor Mrs. Akins, the assistant principal, Mrs. Abel, and the office staff for their help and support this summer in ensuring a smooth transition of leadership.

Before getting into the summer notes and information regarding the opening of school, I would like to share with you some of my backstory. I am originally from the Northeast, born in New York, raised in Connecticut. I received most of my education in Connecticut. After high school, I enlisted in the USAF and spent a total of nine years in the Guard and Reserves. During my initial enlistment, I completed my undergraduate degree at the University of Connecticut. Afterwards, I entered seminary to discern a vocation to the priesthood. I spent six years in religious formation but ultimately discerned God was leading me to marriage and family. After seminary, I started working in Catholic education where I have been for the last 13 years (six as teacher, seven as principal). I have worked in school leadership in Connecticut, Tennessee, and now Florida. I have two Masters degrees in Theology (Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland) and Educational Leadership/Administration (Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska) with additional certificates in advanced studies in Theology, Catholic School Leadership, and Spanish. My wife, Micki, just completed her graduate degree at Vanderbilt University and will begin work as a Family Nurse Practitioner soon. We have two daughters, Rose and Jane, and are anticipating the arrival of our third daughter this November.

My educational philosophy is simple. Education is about leading, teaching, and forming young men and women to be successful and productive members of society. Catholic education is about this and more. Ultimately, the purpose of Catholic education is twofold: to make disciples by teaching students how to live full and happy lives through the pursuit, development, and acquisition of virtue (theological, intellectual, and moral) and to transform society to reflect a more Christian culture animated by the truth and charity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I look forward to meeting you all in person. Enjoy the rest of summer break.

Kind regards,

Mr. Rodgers

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Summer Updates

Facilities

Phoenix Coatings has been making repairs to the south concrete covered walkways and south classroom walls. Phoenix will complete half of the walkway repairs this summer and the other half next summer followed by coating, painting, pavers to match the north classrooms. This will complete the three-year structural maintenance and aesthetic project. We do not anticipate this impacting any back-to-school events including the opening of school on Monday, August 8.

Enrollment

SMCS has an enrollment of approximately 410 students with waiting lists in several grades. We still have some space available in some sections and grades. Our enrollment is strong but it is worth noting, admissions is ongoing and rolling. We have the capacity in some areas to grow. Our families are our best “ambassadors” in the community, so please share the “Good News” of SMCS to prospective families.

Faculty Changes and Updates

- **Erica Neiser (Middle School History):** Ms. Loken recently resigned her teaching position. Middle School History will be taught by Erica Neiser. Ms. Neiser is a retiree from the USAF and most recently served as classroom aide to Ms. Loken. Ms. Neiser earned her Bachelor of Science in Social Psychology from Park University and is in the process of obtaining her History teaching endorsement. She has several years’ experience in the classroom as teacher, aide, and in curriculum development.
- **Connie Kieszek (5th Grade):** Ms. Kieszek is originally from Fort Walton Beach and is an alumna of SMCS. She has a degree from the University of West Florida in Music Performance/Music Teaching and has certifications in Reading (K-6), Music (K-12), and Elementary Education (K-6). She worked in public education for two years before moving into the corporate world where she has worked ever since. She recently made the decision to return to the classroom and is excited to begin teaching once again.
- **Danielle Stilts (Middle School Science):** Ms. Stilts comes to us from Chesterfield, Missouri where she has been in education since 2006. She earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees in education from the University of Missouri and has been publicly recognized several times for her performance in the classroom. She was named Missouri Regional Teacher of the Year in 2019. She recently moved to FWB with her husband and two children.
- **Allison Newsom (Counselor):** Ms. Newsom comes to us from Louisiana. She has a Bachelor of Science in Communication Sciences and Disorders and a Master of Arts in Applied Behavior Analysis with an emphasis on Autism. She has extensive experience working in the field and is eager to begin working at Saint Mary Catholic School.

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- **Mickey Heide (K-8 Computers):** Ms. Heide has a dual degree in English and Professional Writing from Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona. An experienced writer, Ms. Heide had her first novel published in 2020 in addition to having three short stories published in *Folio Magazine*. She has also served as a professional editor. She served as an aide last year and is eager to begin work as a full-time teacher at SMCS.

Back-to-School Dates and Important Information:

- **Tuesday, August 2 - Friday, August 5:** Faculty In-Service
- **Thursday, August 4:** Welcome orientation for new families in the Parish Life Center Café:
 - K-5th Grade at 6:00 pm
 - Middle School at 6:30 pm

These meetings will provide parents of new students (and returning parents, if you would like to attend) an opportunity to learn more about SMCS.

- **Friday, August 5:** “Supply Drop-Off and Meet Your Teacher” for students in Grades 1-8 is from 10:30 am to 11:00 am. Classroom assignments will be posted on the office window.
- **Friday, August 5:** Orientation for K3, K4, and K5
 - **Note:** K3, K4, K5 parents and students are invited to attend orientation in the classroom (times and locations below)
 - K4 – 9:00 am to 9:30 am
 - K3 – 9:30 am to 10:00 am
 - K5 – 10:00 am to 10:30 am
 - Teacher Room #s
 - Room 301 – Ms. Liles, K4A
 - Room 107 – Ms. Pratt, K4B
 - Room 302 – Ms. Rice, K3
 - Room 304 – Ms. Humphrey, K5A
 - Room 303 – Ms. Casey, K5B
 - Supply drop-off for 1st through 8th Grade will be from 10:30 am to 11:30 am

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- **Monday, August 8:** First Day of School/Early Dismissal at 11:30 am (morning care will be available but no AfterCare)/Bus Services Begin
- **Tuesday, August 9:** First Full Day of School (AfterCare begins)
- **Monday, August 22:** Outdoor Elementary Carpool Dismissal Begins

Carpool information

All families will be issued a name tag to display at dismissal time (either carrying in your hand for dismissal in the Gym or on your dashboard) when we move to vehicle dismissal. It is very important to use your name tag to expedite dismissal and help little ones who are not sure about their last names yet. Please use this tag each day throughout the year. This is very important as it will significantly increase the safety and speed of dismissal.

Arrival

- Elementary and Middle School Morning Carpool lines will be up and running the first day of school, from 7:45 am to 7:55 am. In the morning, students in grades K3 through 5th are to be dropped off in the main parking lot off of Coral Dr. Staff members will help the children get out of the car and assist students to the correct classroom.
- Parents of K3, K4, and K5 may walk their child to class the first two weeks of school only. After that, we ask all parents to use the morning car pool line.
- Middle School Carpool is in front of the main office in the u-shaped driveway, off of Robinwood Dr.

Dismissal

- Students in Grades K3-4th, 5th, 6th and 7th with siblings younger than 5th Grade will be picked up in the Gym the first two weeks of school. Then Outdoor Elementary Dismissal will begin.
- Middle School Carpool is for 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th Grade students who do not have siblings younger than 5th Grade.
- Middle School Carpool, both morning and afternoon, will start the first day of school. Middle School Carpool does not participate in "In-Door Dismissal" and operates rain or shine.
- Dismissal for the first two weeks of school will be indoor dismissal in the gym, and Middle School in the Middle School parking lot. We will begin outdoor Elementary Carpool on **Monday, August 22.**

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Bussing

If you are planning on utilizing SMCS bus service for the new school year, please call the office and let us know. Our bus routes are to Navarre, Niceville, and Destin. The bus routes and stops are available on the website. Bus services will begin on the first day of school.

Communication

There are two principle ways we share information to the community:

- SMCS Newsletter – Newsletters are sent to you via the email we have on file for you. The newsletter is also posted on our website each week and on social media.
- Flocknote Texting – Sign up for Flocknote Texts on the front page of our website.

High School Level Courses

We have Middle School courses for high school credit, Computer Science Discoveries 1 for 7th and 8th Grade, Spanish 1 for 7th and 8th Grade, Algebra 1 Honors, and Geometry Honors. 7th and 8th Grade students will choose between Spanish 1 and Computer Science 1 for their elective. In order to take Algebra 1, students must meet the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee Matrix which includes a course grade of A or B in Prealgebra. Please see our handbook on the website for more information. We are also a Florida Virtual School, and students may take courses online, to include other foreign languages. Parents of 7th Grade students, please notify your child's homeroom teacher with their choice for Computer Science or Spanish 1.

Laptop Program for Middle School

We have a 1-to-1 computer device program in Middle School. All of our middle school students will receive a Dell laptop. All students and parents must sign the Acceptable Use Policy in order to be assigned a laptop. Students will be using the laptops in the classroom for the first few weeks of school, then they will be able to take them home.

Breakfast and Lunch

We have not heard one way or another what this program will look like this year. We will send home any pertinent information in your Welcome Packet. We ask that you fill it out ASAP and return it to the school.

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PowerSchool: Grades Online

We use an online web-based school gradebook program called PowerSchool, where you can access your child's grades and all assignments in real-time. If you are a new family, log-in information will be sent to you by Ms. Neiger during the first two weeks of school. If you are a returning student, please remember to keep your student(s) PowerSchool Username and Password from the 2021-2022 school year. These PowerSchool Usernames and Passwords will be enabled for the 2022-2023 school year in August.

Parent Handbook

Our Handbook can be found on our website. Please review and sign the acceptance form that will be sent home in your Welcome Packets.

PTO

President: Mrs. Cristina Gill – cristina.gill@yahoo.com – (706) 969-6361

Vice President: Stacey Mai

Secretary: Lori Lomax

Treasurer: Rochelle Heidbreder

Member at Large/Former President: Karen Kirk

Stay Connected

Find us on Facebook – Saint Mary Catholic School PTO

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3136807093067011>

Sign up for the PTO Remind App:

text@3h7879 to the number 81010

Covid-19 Procedures

- SMCS will continue to monitor the situation with the pandemic and will follow our local health department and guidance from the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee.
- Masks continue to be optional.

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Final Note

If you have any questions and/or concerns, please feel free to call or email anyone in the office during regular school hours, and we will do our best to answer them. Let's make this a great year!