



## DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER

*Superintendent of Schools*

February 15, 2022

St. Faustus

Dear St. Elizabeth Seton School Community:

I am writing to update you on some of the activity that has taken place since I last communicated with you in spring 2021, and to inform you of our plans for next year. To recap where we've been:

**Winter/Spring 2021:** The Catholic School Office for the Diocese of Manchester, in collaboration with our local pastors and school leaders, developed a plan for the reinvigoration of Catholic education for the tri-city area of Rochester, Somersworth, and Dover, NH. This work included considering all options in pursuit of operational vitality, specifically: the unification of Saint Mary Academy and St. Elizabeth Seton School and exploring potential locations to build a new campus for such an endeavor. On April 21, 2021, the decision to continue to explore other viable options and the development of a long-term strategic plan for Catholic education in the tri-city area was communicated to families and staff of both schools based on feedback and suggestions from community surveys, answering questions at community meetings, responding to parent calls and emails, and receiving feedback from St. Mary Parish in Rochester.

**Summer/Fall 2021:** We explored the possibilities of a new building and location at the St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish property in Somersworth, assessed the costs and benefits of renovating the existing Saint Mary Academy building in Dover, discussed the potential for the two schools to remain *separate* entities, and examined the current financial situation at each school.

**Winter 2022:** After prayerful consideration of the architectural exploration conducted on the parish property in Somersworth, the engineering reports of the classroom building in Dover, and the current financial situation of both schools, (and in concert with our Catholic Schools Strategic Plan), our team is ready to announce our plans for the future of Catholic education in the tri-city area.

As part of a phased plan to unify, invigorate, and uplift Catholic education in the area, St. Elizabeth Seton School will close the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. The school's ongoing deficit budget and forbidding financial picture, persistent enrollment struggles in the midst of a state-wide enrollment boom, aging and too-large-to-maintain facility, make it impractical to continue operations beyond this year. Every family currently enrolled and soon-to-be-enrolled will be welcomed at Saint Mary Academy in Dover over the coming months in preparation for next school year. Opened in 1912, Saint Mary Academy's financial picture is strong and enrollment sits

at 214 students (with capacity for 400), making it the ideal site for both communities to unify as one with a dedicated class per grade level.

In order to make this transition as smooth as possible, we are announcing the following:

**Tuition-** Tuition for the next academic year will be honored at this year's current SES tuition rate, meaning there will not be a tuition increase next year. Saint Mary Academy is committed to affordability and all current financial aid packages and completed enrollment contracts will be honored for next year.

**Transportation-** Bus transportation is currently being considered for SES families, from Rochester to Dover.

**Uniforms-** Any current SES family that registers at SMA will receive a \$150 gift card to Land's End to use towards school uniforms, and inventory in the school's uniform swap is currently being restocked.

As we endeavor to lift up Catholic education in the tri-city area, we remain steadfast in our commitment to parents as the primary educators of their children. This partnership between school and home is of utmost importance and is cultivated by the school leader. As the first phase of this plan, I have created a new Head of School position at SMA whose role will be to serve as the school's visionary leader and most ardent partner with parents. This position will oversee the matriculation of SES students to SMA, and will then work to develop both short and long-term planning in all areas of school operations.

I am pleased to share that Mrs. Brandy Houle will be transitioning to Saint Mary Academy as this new Head of School. Mrs. Houle has a rich history with Saint Mary Academy. A native of Somersworth, Mrs. Houle attended SMA as a student. She then taught at the school for twelve years, before pursuing Catholic school administration. Mrs. Houle has been successfully leading Saint Benedict Academy in Manchester, NH for the past three years and has brought financial stability and significant enrollment growth to the Manchester inner-city school through her ability to build community and relationships, enhance the quality of instruction and school culture, and bring a vision for the future. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Education and Childhood Studies from Plymouth State University and her Master's degree in Education in Curriculum Instruction and Educational Leadership from Southern New Hampshire University. A parishioner of St. Ignatius of Loyola Parish, Mrs. Houle currently resides in the tri-city area with her husband and their three children, all of whom attended Saint Mary Academy. Her impressive collegiate career, core competencies, extensive classroom experience, successful leadership, witness of faith, and her ability to lead an entire community towards a common vision clearly indicate she possesses the charisms and characteristics necessary to lead Saint Mary Academy towards a bright future.

Mrs. Houle is excited to come back to Dover to immediately begin guiding SES and SMA families, faculty, and staff through this transition before she formally begins as Head of School on July 1,

2022. Over the next few months, Mrs. Houle will work with the Catholic Schools Office, faculty, staff, and advisory board at both schools to build the organizational chart to support the operations, mission, and goals of Saint Mary Academy. In concert with the entire SMA community, Mrs. Houle will lead the community into the second phase of the tri-city plan by initiating a five-year strategic plan to advance the school in its mission of inspiring students to honor God, love learning, and serve others. We look forward to engaging you in that next phase.

Parents from both schools are invited to attend a meeting with Mrs. Houle and me on **Thursday, February 17, 2022, at St. Mary Church Hall in Dover on the corner of Chestnut St. and Fourth St. from 6:00 - 7:30 PM** to introduce Mrs. Houle and discuss the process of planning for next year and answer questions.

Mrs. Houle will be forming an Admissions Team to aide SES families in their transition to Saint Mary Academy. An open house for current SES families to explore Saint Mary Academy and meet teachers will be planned; date forthcoming. If you would like to contact Mrs. Houle to schedule a visit to the school or to answer any of your questions, you may do so at [Bhoule@saintmaryacademy.org](mailto:Bhoule@saintmaryacademy.org)

**To REGISTER YOUR CHILD as a student at SAINT MARY ACADEMY for the 2022-2023 Year:** Student registration fees will be waived for SES families, and the link to register your child will be emailed to you.

I understand that with the closure of a school comes a mix of emotions. I am so thankful for your enduring commitment to providing a Catholic education for your child(ren) at St. Elizabeth Seton School. Your dedication and zeal will be wonderful additions to the Saint Mary Academy community and I look to the future with great hope. It is my fervent prayer that Catholic education continue to thrive in the tri-city area for generations to come. This step, although bittersweet, will pave the way for robust and authentic Catholic formation for any family that desires it. I am indebted to our faculty and staff for their dedication and faith in living their vocation in service to God and our families. Our team will work closely with SES faculty and staff in determining what the staffing needs will be at Saint Mary Academy or other area Catholic schools. I am looking forward to continuing the journey with you all. May Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word, bring our efforts to Her Son, so that all we do be for His Glory.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



David A. Thibault  
Superintendent of Catholic Schools