

Minutes

Atlanta Archdiocesan Schools' Advisory Council Meeting

Tuesday, 3-18-25

7:30-9:00am

In Attendance: **Patty Childs, Tony Bonta, Lisa Cordell, Brian Hershberger, Joey Nordmark, Fr. Valery Akoh, Patrick Lowther, Alexandra Balzer, Vivian Vu, Brent Herrin and Brad Wilson.**
Absent: **Pam Tennell, Kevin Murray, Jennifer Prindiville, Brandi Kler, Hilary Dixon, John Cryer.**

- **Welcome and Opening Prayer**

Brian Hershberger welcomed everyone to the ASAC meeting. Patty led everyone in prayer, followed by the recitation of the mission statement.

- **Approval of Agenda**

Brian asked for a motion to approve the agenda. The motion to approve was given and seconded.

- **Approval of the January 2025 Meeting Minutes**

Brian asked for a motion to approve the January 2025 ASAC minutes. The motion to approve the minutes was given and seconded.

- **Committee Reports**

Policy Committee - AI Policy – Patrick Lowther

Patrick Lowther said changes were made to the AI policy to include faculty and staff. Patty had a chance to meet with the principals and they welcomed the idea of including the faculty and staff in the AI policy. He sent the changes in an email report and said if anyone has any additional ideas to please pass along. He said this Archdiocesan policy will be broader to set guidelines for the schools, but the schools may be more restrictive and specific in their local policies. Patrick offered help to any schools that need guidance in this process. Patty advised the policy committee that she will soon go through the policy manual to find any inaccuracies or conflicting statements that need clarification or cleaning up.

Nominating Committee – Brian Hershberger

Brian apologized for the confusion regarding the school council meeting sign-up. He reminded the council that there were a few schools that still need to be visited. Brian said he will advise the principals at least a week in advance of our ASAC council member being in attendance. Brian inquired as to whether the principals had given any recommendations for new members on our council. Patty said she had not received any yet but will ask again.

Alex Balzer gave a brief report on her visit to St. Mary's Academy. She said she had a great visit. St. Mary's Academy was very welcoming and accommodating and she got a nice tour of the facility. Her and Tony were there for the same meeting so she suggested better communication so that we can cover more meetings instead of having two at one meeting.

Strategic Planning Committee – Joey Nordmark

Joey said he, Tony and John Cryer met on January 23rd to discuss the Strategic Planning process. He said January – April 2025 is an important phase and will be focused on these two priorities:

- Synthesizing the survey data to gather insights
- Strategic Planning (Sub) Committee work on the 4 domains of the plan

The four domains of the Strategic Plan include:

- Mission & Catholic Identity
- Governance & Leadership
- Academic Excellence
- Operational Vitality

Joey referenced the following timeline:

- July - September 2025 will be focused on summarizing the Strategic Plan so that it can be socialized with key stakeholders (ex. Principals, Advisory Councils, ASAC) for their review.
- October - November 2025 will be focused on submitting the final draft of the Strategic Plan to the Archbishop for review and approval.

The OCS and principals met in January to identify the top strategic priorities that must be addressed by the new Strategic Plan as follows:

- Strong Catholic Identity
- High Academic Standards
- Enrollment Challenges
- Finding Mission-Driven Teachers
- Expectations & Mission Support (Parents, Clergy)
- Funding the Rising Cost to Educate

The principals also highlighted some key areas of need for their schools as follows:

- Additional Funding Sources to Support Vitality
- The Need for Daycare
- Assistance with Public Relations/Marketing
- Collaboration with Parishes and Clergy
- The importance of a Pre-K-12th Grade System Articulation

Joey said the next steps will be:

- Interviews to be conducted with focus groups for Students (middle School and High School), Alumni (Recent & Alumni Parents), and Clergy
- Develop and send surveys to parishioners (non-Catholic school parents) requesting feedback
- Analyze feedback from focus groups and survey responses to inform Marketing Strategy/Tactics and Strategic Plan
- Conduct site visits to several schools as a way of understanding SWOT to inform Marketing Strategy/Tactics
- Form Strategic Planning Sub-Committees (ASAC Members to serve on one Sub-Committee)
- Schedule Strategic Planning Meeting(s) in February/March and/or leverage the next ASAC Meeting to conduct Strategic Planning Committee (and Sub-Committee) work

Brian thanked Joey for all his work on this project.

Finance Committee – Brad Wilson and Patty Childs

Brad said as of this date we have approved 14 budgets. One is awaiting the pastor's input and another was sent back to rework and we will schedule another meeting with the pastor present. Brad said he is working on a graph showing the tuition increases for all the schools. Patty said 6 -7% is the average tuition increase across the board. This is due to inflation along with aging facilities, insurance, safety and maintenance expenses, etc. Brian Hershberger asked if the schools set aside funds for these expenses. Brad said the schools have been told to keep a capital reserve, but not all have been able to accomplish that. Every school has an endowment, some are more robust than others. All of these factors come into review when balancing each school budget for the upcoming year. Without knowing what the total enrollment will be for the next school year adds to this challenge. A discussion followed.

- **GA GOAL & GA Promise Updates**

Brian asked Tony Bonta to give a report on GA GOAL and GA Promise Scholarships

Tony reported the following:

1. GA GOAL Report
 1. Current Cap: \$120 million
 2. Bill (Legislation) reduced the cap to \$140 million from \$200 million.
 3. GA GOAL Staff is planning on a 2-year effort to advocate for \$200 million
 4. Proration for 2025 was 53.3%
2. GA Promise Updates
 1. Online application portal is open through April 15, 2025
 2. Initial funding will be available after July 1, 2025
 3. Up to \$6,500 (for the first year 2025-2026. (Administrative fee may apply)
 4. Payments go to families on an online platform to make payments to eligible providers and vendors from an individual student's GA Promise account.
 5. All our AoA Schools are GA Promise Schools. Some schools are now receiving students.
 6. GA Promise cannot be combined with SB10 funds or GA Goal.
 7. Low-income families will be on the first round of applicants processed.

A lengthy discussion ensued on GA Promise.

- Fr. Valery requested that more information be distributed to the Pastors and Priests to promote GA Promise.
- Fr. Valery asked Patty to come to the Priests' Council meeting this Thursday to promote GA Promise. Patty said that she would reach out to Fr. Paul Moreau, Pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Athens, GA.
- Ms. Vivian Hanh Ngo Vu mentioned that she is a parishioner at Holy Vietnamese Martyrs, and a parent at St. John the Evangelist said she has not seen any publicity for GA Promise. Patty and Tony stated that information and marketing materials had been sent out by the Office of Communications. Patty and Tony said that they would check with the schools to promote GA Promise.
- Brad, Patty and Tony answered a number of questions on GA Promise.

- Ms. Alex Weber-Balzer raised several points about GA Promise and asked how schools would be able to know which families received GA Promise and keep up with financial oversight of funds coming into the school.
- **Open Doors Program – Lisa Cordell**

Lisa Cordell, Director of the Open Doors Program, introduced herself to the council and gave a brief history of her time as principal at Our Lady of the Assumption. Lisa said Open Doors is a program that is being introduced to our schools which will allow for modification of curriculum in order to accept students with intellectual disabilities (Downs Syndrome, developmental delayed, and autism). This program has a 2-year rollout. OLA and St. John Neumann have already been doing this for several years. Holy Redeemer is now modifying the curriculum for one student but has not completed their 2 years. Lisa said some schools are better prepared for this program than others. Blessed Trinity and St. Pius X are in their first year of the rollout, along with St. Joseph-Marietta, IHM, St. Thomas More and St. Peter Claver. This program does require a special education teacher and they will be required to write ISSP's (Individual Student Service Plans). All of our schools with the exception of OLA and St. John Neumann can accept SB10 money. SB10 funds are received from the state. OLA and St. John Neumann have applied for SB10 money and hopefully will be approved this summer.

Joey asked Lisa if there was a specific number of students that can be accepted in this program at any given school. Lisa said it will vary based on the resources at that school but she doesn't see more than 5 or 10 students per school being accommodated. Lisa said it takes a lot of heart and work to have this in their school even with the help of a special ed teacher. Curriculum modification is difficult because it doesn't work across the board as each student in this program has different needs. Lisa said these special students offer more to the other students than the other students offer to them.

- **St. Mary's Academy Task Force Meeting**

Patty started the conversation by expressing the need to start working on solutions for St. Mary's Academy's many challenges. As a result of this, a task force was formed and met at St. Mary's Academy to go through an exercise called Nominal Reduction Process. This process gives everyone on the task force a few minutes to make a list of priorities for St. Mary's Academy future success. Everyone gave their 1 & 2nd priority from this list. The hope is by doing this exercise 5-10 top priorities will be determined to work on for the future.

Tony provided a handout showing the list of everyone's priorities. Tony said the task force consisted of SMA staff, ASAC, Archdiocesan & OCS staff, Catholic Construction, stakeholders & alumni. Tony said that the 3 main components of this exercise are context, current realities and plan for the future.

Joey Nordmark was on the task force and reported how impressed he was with the school and admitted that he did not have full appreciation for the school before his visit. He said there are very passionate stakeholders that want to see this school succeed. Joey said it was a very robust discussion and coming away from that meeting he realized that these challenges are much more complicated than a simple marketing plan. Joey observed top challenges to be:

1. Location - Impacts affordability and safety issues.
2. Lack of a feeder school – Creates more need for parish support
3. Value Proposition – two viable free school options in close proximity
4. Lack of Alumni Unity due to combining Our Lady of Victory and Our Lady of Mercy to create a new PreK-12 model & name change. OLM alumni felt an alienation to their alma mater.
5. The co-mingling of the lower and upper schools is a huge challenge without having separate buildings for elementary and high school, creating an illusion of not advancing to the next level.
6. From a financial perspective, the school's marketing efforts are targeting less affluent families who ultimately need financial aid. We are not capturing more affluent families from areas such as Peachtree City to have a "payer-mix" which would make the school more financially viable.

Brad gave a financial update of St. Mary's Academy. Brad said the archdiocese is chipping in about \$700,000 in block grant funds to St. Mary's. On top of that we gave two million in 2023 and around 3 million in 2024 and that amount continues in the current budget. Brad said that some of our other schools are close to where St. Mary's Academy is. This is due to under-enrollment which then becomes a marketing challenge. Patty added that despite facing all of these challenges, we want to give it our best effort in order for St. Mary's Academy to succeed. We need to ask ourselves if a PreK-12 model is the best option for that school. Fr. Valery suggested bringing this subject up at a deanery meeting and/or having the archbishop and auxiliary bishops talk to the faithful to promote St. Mary's Academy. Joey suggested a survey conducted by the archbishop's office asking what it would take for their family to enroll their children into this school. This would take time to accumulate the data. A lengthy discussion followed regarding AP vs. Dual Enrollment, separating the lower and upper school and implementing Catholic Virtual. Brian suggested that the council schedule an extra meeting before the June meeting to further discuss St. Mary's Academy.

Brian asked Fr. Valery to lead the council in a closing prayer.

- **Adjournment and Next Meeting Date: Tuesday, June 3, 2025 at 7:30am.**

Respectfully submitted,

Debbie Wheeler
Schools Program Specialist