

**State of School Address, Year I
Faustin Weber, Principal
PTO Meeting, February 15, 2017**

Good evening. Each year, I do a “state of the school” with parents— a candid look at where things are, where they aren’t, some of our future goals, short term and long term—from my perspective as principal of the school.

I. Our mission

We have our first ever mission statement—hot off the press!

Mission statement “St. Michael Catholic High School, a college preparatory school of the Archdiocese of Mobile, aspires for its students to become scholars, leaders and disciples of Jesus Christ.”

“Scholars, Leaders, Disciples”

Beautiful in its simplicity and clarity—but also extraordinarily ambitious.

- Not just “good students,” but a “scholars.” By “scholars” we mean that regardless of natural ability, we expect students to push themselves to be the best student possible.
- Not just students who are “good”, but students who *leads others* to what is good.
- Not just “Christians” in some sort of generic, abstract sense, but disciples of Jesus Christ!

But it’s bold on purpose. I want this school to be marked by audacious optimism in kids—in who they are, and what they can do. That optimism is not polly-annish idealism, but rooted in our faith in the transforming power of God’s grace in the life of our students, calling them beyond themselves, challenging them to build “great hearts and minds, and to do great things “as our tagline says.

I’ve found that kids will generally rise to whatever expectation we have of them, for better or for worse. Too often, we aim too low. I am reminded of Shakespeare’s comment, that “the problem is not that we aim too high and miss, but that we aim too low and hit our mark.”

Let this school always be a place that encourages students to aim high! We don’t want students who come to St. Michael to be ordinary, but extraordinary.

II. The Present

So let’s talk about where things are right now—the present. Six things I want to briefly highlight:

- 1) Current enrollment—99 kids. 63 freshman, 36 sophomores, 40 boys, 59 girls. We’re opening one grade per year, so next year we’ll have another class. Contrary to the “fear” of some students that we’d be simply “Christ the King, 9th grade”— we have really good diversity. These are the schools our 99 students attended last year:
 - 24 students came from Christ the King
 - 11 from St. Patrick,

- 6 from St. Benedict,
- 19 from McGill,
- 7 from Spanish Fort HS,
- 4 from Bayside Academy,
- 4 from Daphne MS,
- 1 from Daphne HS,
- 1 from Fairhope MS,
- 4 from Fairhope HS,
- 2 from Gulf Shores High School,
- 1 from Robertsedale HS,
- 4 HomeSchoolers.
- 11 students from somewhere else, including, for example, two students from Faith Academy in Mobile

In fact, it's a wonderful mix, and I think the students have been pleased to forge new friendships from all over the place. I suspect that trend will continue: as a college preparatory, faith based institution, we'll continue to be an appealing option for families across Baldwin County. For example, we send a bus south of Foley every morning and afternoon to pick up families from south Baldwin, and we're committed to that continuing.

2) We also began with a wonderful groups of adults—teachers and staff. I read an article recently from a university president, who said building a great university is similar to building a great baseball team—it begins with the players. And for schools, it begins with the faculty. I couldn't be happier with our first group. I was uniquely blessed to have a full year to vet them—we had over 225 applications, and I was able to really cherry-pick, hiring 10 full time teachers, an AD, finance director, admission director, receptionist and custodians. Kids love their teachers here, and it's reciprocal—teachers love their students. You can see that in our hallways, in our lunchroom, through the banter and teasing, in the relaxed, comfortable way they interact together.

A lot is written and debated today about what makes for a good school—fights about curriculum, about control, common core, testing, achievement, results, expectations—but it's not rocket science! It's all about relationships—relationships between students and teachers, between families and teachers, between students and students. Relationships determine school culture, and culture either elevates or devalues the academic aspirations of the school. We are blessed to have very good relationships, and as a result, a very optimistic, very synergistic culture that inspires kids to aim high.

3) We've really worked hard to build a sense of family here, a "community". We do that in a variety of ways. First, we meet together as an entire school three times/week. On Monday I speak to the kids, on Wednesday, we go to Mass together, and on Friday, our student government leads the assembly. These common gatherings give us a common identity, a set of shared experiences, a common language and set of goals.

We also have divided up the student body into "Houses" and further subdivided each House into "Advisories." I got the idea of the House system when I visited a British boarding school about 5 years ago—they've been dividing into houses for centuries—and what I found attractive about them is they tied together different grade levels of the school in a way that's very different than most American high schools. Most high schools are horizontally aligned—freshman with

freshman, sophomores w/ sophomores. But they are rarely vertically aligned—seniors with underclassmen, for example. It's hard to ask older kids to be leaders if they don't know the underclassmen and very rarely interact with them. So we've created 4 Houses, each named after an early bishop of our archdiocese. Each faculty and staff member is also assigned to a House, and we now compete against each other—in pep rallies, in charitable efforts, in everything. Kids love it. It's creating criss-crossing relationships. It's encouraging a sub-layer of leadership, as each House is represented by 4 officers, the 16 of whom together form our House Council. I also think it's really contributed to a sense of family and fun here.

4) I've been pleased with athletic program and the job that Paul and the coaches are doing with our kids. We began this year with 7 JV sports—volleyball, football, boys' and girls' basketball, boys' and girls' soccer, and swim/dive. We've been amazingly competitive, particularly in girls's sports, with the volleyball team winning about half their games, and the girls' basketball team finishing at 16-2. But the boys have been gutty, competitive, never backing down, even when they're obviously outmatched, playing schools literally 20 times our size. Aside from results, what I've been happiest about is the spirit and demeanor of our students—great sportsmanship, in both defeat and victory. I believe athletics is a huge way to advance the mission of a Catholic school, to build virtue in students, help them work for long term ends, how to get along with others, how to put team before self. Athletic program is doing that.

5) Fifth, I'm very pleased with the strides we're taking in the Arts. If you went to the Christmas music concert, you had to walk away a bit stunned, that many kids, who literally started playing an instrument in August, sounded that good by December. And if you extrapolate that out a few years, it's going to be very exciting. I think we'll be known soon as a school for the Arts, and I believe we'll be very appealing for artistically inclined students.

6) Sixth, and finally, our faith life is strong here. I didn't put that last to suggest it's the least important, but to emphasize in a Catholic school, faith is truly the lens through which everything else is focused. Mr. Martin is doing a super job as our Campus minister. Mass every Wednesday is a huge part of our week. We have fantastic support of the priests, all of whom rotate through and obviously support what we're doing here. The March for Life brought 62 of our 99 kids—about 65% of our student body—who rode in a bus for twenty hours to stand up for life in our nation's capital. We have good, interesting religion classes here. We start each day with prayer, before classes begin, and one Wednesdays before lunch. I've been very edified by the faith of our kids.

III. The future—

So, God has really blessed us in this, our first year. Let's talk briefly about the upcoming year, and then a little beyond that.

- 1) The biggest task on my desk right now: Hiring the next round of faculty. It's critical to build on what we've started. We're hiring for 7 new positions next year: Second teachers in theology, math, science, english, history, a counselor, a music teacher, and an art teacher.
- 2) On this last piece, the art position, we're still going to be a school of less than 200, so next year, I've hired a young lady who will do triple duty for us, beginning the art program by teaching a couple of classes, helping us out with PE and assistant coaching, and helping us

with an elective for juniors next year to improve their reading comprehension before the second semester ACT's start up. Her name is Caitlyn Scimeca, the wife of Mr. John Scimeca, our history teacher. She's also a twenty-something young lady on our faculty—the first of these, so I think she'll appeal to our girls.

- 3) For the full time counseling position, I am dividing it into two parts—a personal counselor, for kids who are going through difficult times, and a college counselor, to help kids think about colleges and help them apply for admissions and scholarships. I've hired Dr. Keith Lindley for the college counseling post, who will continue to teach Latin for us, and Mrs. Missy Calvery for the personal post. I announced Missy this morning.
- 4) Mr. Pryor is pumping so many students into Band and Choral program that we'll be hiring an assistant teacher for him to handle the load and assist with the middle schools and high school next year, so as to keep the ball rolling.
- 5) Interviewing continues for the core positions in theology, math, science, english and history, but based on the applicants, it looks like I'm going to be able to be very selective again. Though I don't believe in quotas—I'll hire the best teachers who are the best fit for our school—expect to see more females on our faculty at the end of this round of hiring.
- 6) In terms of short-term needs, we need a school bus for our athletic teams and field trips. We think we can get a good used bus, fix it up, get it in school colors, for about 50K. We're also going to teach biology for the first time next year—it's a junior year requirement—and we're going to outfit a biology lab between now and August. It will cost us approximately 25K.
- 7) Looking a bit further out, but hopefully not too far, we have a master plan that lays out future facility development. Perhaps the most immediate need is a weightlifting facility, with boys/girls' locker room, which would be adjacent to the practice field. We've priced that tentatively at about \$500,000. We've also priced the layout of the upper athletic fields—to include the football/soccer stadium and baseball field. The grading and site work, without any bleachers or structures, is about \$1,500,000. The other need is for a chapel, just behind the courtyard, for approximately 2 million dollars. Longer down the road, the master plan envisions more classrooms, and also a performing arts building, with a theater and band room. How soon we'll be able to do these things depends on God's providence and the generosity of others.

4. Conclusion:

Let us continue to remember that our ultimate mission is to build scholars, leaders and disciples. If we can build those things in our students, we'll make literally an ETERNAL difference in their lives.

Last Sunday at Christ the King Church, we sang "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," the text of which was written by Charles Wesley in the early 1700's. Verse 3 is very powerful:

*Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,*

*till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.*

I believe this gets to the very core of our mission together, as parents and as educators: We are “finishing thy new creation” which has begun in the life of our students and children, so that one day “in heaven they (will) take their place,” “lost in wonder, love and praise.”

May we never lose our inspiration and vision for this most important work.