



Mighty St. Mike's

This private Episcopal day school is thriving

By Jan Ferris Heenan

The ongoing recession has hampered some private schools. But even with tuition topping out at \$10,500, St. Michael's Episcopal Day School in Carmichael is thriving. Enrollment has remained robust in recent years, and the campus is heading into the third and final phase of a decade-long expansion.

The addition—known as iMAST (Integrated Math, Arts, Science and Technology)—will add a dedicated science lab to the Mission Avenue campus as well as a theater and classrooms.

The expansion will allow for the ongoing integration of subject matter that drives St. Michael's.

"This expansion will allow us to enhance our curriculum," says Mary Heise, who serves as associate to Fr. Jesse Vaughan, St. Michael's head of school. "The whole educational philosophy of the school and the mission is developing the whole child ... to really develop the mind, the body and the soul."

When completed, the new science lab will also provide a home for St. Michael's year-old robotics program.



St. Michael's student council members (front row) - Sabrina Veller, Olivia Eliopoulos, Hannah Kaplan (back row) - Theo Christopoulos, Tanner Kaplan

The new arts facility will allow the school to offer instrument lessons in addition to the existing vocal and bell choir programs, and will boast a more formal theater than the parish center commonly used for student performances.

Above all, the expansion will allow for the ongoing integration of subject matter that drives St. Michael's, which opened in 1963 as an elementary school and expanded to seventh and eighth grades in the 1980s. That approach is in play whether students are engaging in a mock version of the Electoral College

for student elections or learning about pi in the school garden. (Or, in the case of St. Michael's kindergartners, harvesting late-blooming tomatoes on an early October day to make salsa.)

Though the school is a ministry of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, its 230 students come from a variety of faith backgrounds, both Christian and non-Christian. Four mornings a week, the school community gathers in the chapel for a brief program of music, prayer and sharing—with students often taking the lead.

Heise calls the daily ritual "centering." Parent Kathy Procida

Christopoulos agrees. "In that chapel, it's magic," she says. "From the time they're in kindergarten, they go to the front of the chapel and present (news of) their activities, their beliefs."

Her son, Theo Christopoulos, says chapel is a high point of each day. "It's a chance to relax and forget about homework," explains the eighth-grader, working on a report about Euclid, the Greek mathematician, in the school library on a recent weekday.

Christopoulos has attended St. Michael's since kindergarten. He was a shy newcomer, his mom recalls,

but has blossomed on the Carmichael campus. He was inaugurated student body president in October and plans to attend Jesuit High School next year. He has appreciated his schooling, he says. "I like the atmosphere: all friends; no bullies. You can be who you want to be."

The curriculum at St. Michael's is rigorous but balanced. Spanish and computer instruction begin in kindergarten. Students take music and art, along with science, math, history and English. Latin is introduced in seventh grade. And in keeping with the emphasis on classical education, middle-school students attend the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, attend actors' workshops and return home to perform their own Shakespearean vignettes.

Community service or "service learning" is also a key component at St. Michael's.

That doesn't mean that athletics get short shrift, Heise notes. Steve Buzzard—whose after-school Buzzard Ball basketball programs are popular with students from many area schools—has taught PE at St. Michael's for nearly 20 years. The school belongs to the Parochial Athletic League, which is run by the Catholic diocese of Sacramento but

open to other denominational and secular private schools.

Community service or "service learning" is also a key component at St. Michael's. Eighth-graders tutor children at a nearby elementary school. Seventh-graders help seniors from a Carmichael retirement home write their autobiographies. Another class prepares lunches for Mustard Seed School, Sacramento's campus for homeless children. Preschoolers were even asked recently to bring in one of their own toys to donate to St. John's Shelter Program for Women and Children.

Jim McArdle retired as an Air Force flight instructor some two decades ago and has worked at St. Michael's ever since. His wife, Jane, is a longtime science teacher at the school. McArdle is the director of technology, teaches eighth-grade history and works alongside parent and grandparent volunteers in the school lunchroom each day. His military training comes to the fore on a recent rainy day as he deftly moves students into formation and funnels them in and out of the cafeteria.

The job is a gratifying one, McArdle says. "What I dearly love is to work with kids and see the proverbial light go on," he said. "They're so positive about life. It's like having 200 grandchildren."

Correction

Last month, we incorrectly stated that the Sacramento County Office of Education oversees \$137 billion in funding. The correct figure is nearly \$2.5 billion. We regret the error.

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