

Open Letter from CSS Board Chairman, Mark Scott, to All CC and WC Stakeholders

June 11, 2010

Dear Catholic Central and West Catholic High School Stakeholders,

I have received several thoughtful communications regarding the changes to the operation of our high schools. I wish to thank those who have taken the time to express their thoughts via letter and e-mail and those who attended the Grand Rapids Secondary Schools Board (the “Board”) meeting on June 3rd. Having concerns and expressing them in a professional and respectful way shows passion for the educational ministry of the Church, of which our high schools are a part. I am writing on behalf of the Board to attempt to bring clarity to some misconceptions and misunderstandings existing within our community.

The Board and Its Role – The Board is an advisory board consisting of volunteers that have answered the call in service to the leadership of our high schools. The Board consists of 12 lay members and 3 members of our clergy. The lay members of the Board include equal representation from the CC and WC communities, and many are steeped in the traditions of our high schools. The lay members represent varied occupations, including, an attorney, two accountants, four educators, including three in educational leadership, a professional recruiter, and an insurance salesman.

Members of the Board are nominated by fellow members or school leadership based upon the nominee’s demonstrated passion for the educational ministry of our Church. Nominees are interviewed by the Executive Committee of the Board to ensure that each possesses the requisite knowledge and skills to provide quality advice on matters pertaining to our schools. Our primary role is to advise the Pastor/President on the general vision and direction of the schools. We develop our judgments and advice based upon a review of available data, input from stakeholders, staff and administration and our own personal experiences. Like most school and corporate boards, we do not involve ourselves in personnel matters. Our Pastor/President, Reverend R. Louis Staker, as Superintendent of our schools, **must** have the right to choose his team without intrusion from the Board. His performance is formally evaluated by Bishop Hurley. We do not play a role in that process.

Mission and Vision Statements – A committee of the Board was formed in February to begin the process of affirming our Mission Statement – our purpose as an organization – as well as to create a Vision Statement – our aspirations as an organization. No formal strategic planning has taken place within our high schools since 2001.

The Strategic Planning Vision Committee does not address the question of **how** we go about meeting those aspirations. That phase of the process will be led by our principal, Mr. Thomas Maj, with assistance from staff and stakeholders upon the completion of the Vision and as we begin to set goals to realize the Vision. The Committee has been ably led by my colleague, Mr. David Venekase, one of our educational leadership professionals on the Board, and has included a cross-section of Board and community members from CC and WC, CSS administration and staff, the building principals and vice principals and representatives of the teaching staffs. What you have seen so far has received extremely limited input from Bishop as he has allowed the Committee great latitude to develop the Vision without intrusion. We expect to and must receive his approval upon completion of our work.

As part of its deliberations, the Committee has reviewed, among other things, the statements of position from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and various papal documents that pertain to the ministry of Catholic schools. The Board and the Vision Committee unequivocally join you in aspiring to those values. Every member of the Committee would like to welcome any student who wants to come to our schools and would love to be blind to the academic or financial challenges they may face. However, the Board and administration would be derelict in its duties to ignore the financial realities of our schools and those of many of our families. We aspire to one day reach a point where we can ensure funding for every tuition need requested and enough funds to keep tuition reasonable for all families. The present reality, which cannot be ignored, is that we do not have funding available to financially support every family that cannot pay our tuition rates.

The Committee met several times during February and March and developed the Mission and Vision drafts that were posted on-line to solicit stakeholder input. Elitism was non-existent in our deliberations. The focus was clearly on developing a document that exuded quality... a document that would draw people to the conclusion that this is an organization that expects a high level of performance in ALL aspects of its operations, an expectation all should have in return for their investment.

Mr. Veneklas led several Town Hall meetings with teachers, staff and stakeholders from each school to explain the goals and objectives of the Committee and review the draft Mission and Vision statements prior to posting the on-line survey to seek input and feedback from all stakeholders. We are grateful for the tremendous input received from the nearly 1,000 survey responses. They will add value to the process as we reshape the final document. Perhaps we missed the mark or poorly communicated that objective in some of the passages of the Vision, which is EXACTLY why we solicited stakeholder input. So, I kindly ask you to withhold final judgment as the process IS NOT complete. The survey indicated that each component of the draft Mission and Vision statements received over 88% support as the right direction for the schools and more than 80% support for the overall language.

The Committee reconvened this past Wednesday to read through all of the feedback and discuss revisions. It was a very positive experience incorporating some of the great suggestions we received to further improve the Mission and Vision statements and clarify their meaning. There will be additional progress updates communicated to you late this summer and into the fall.

The Vision for the future of our schools is entirely different from the operating structure that may be used to achieve the Vision. As noted above, the Vision is not complete; however, that does not necessitate waiting to put operating structures in place. Organizations such as ours must make structural decisions every day and they do not change what they aspire to be. The operating structure and financial discipline initiatives represent two of those decisions discussed in November.

Restructuring Plan – On May 13, the Board met in closed session as it would have been inappropriate to have public discussions about subjects that could result in job losses. During the meeting, we considered the pros and cons of Father Stasker's proposal to consolidate the principal positions. We engaged in a nearly 3-hour long discussion regarding the advantages and disadvantages of having one principal and the pressure we expect to see on enrollment numbers

due to the planned enforcement of existing policy regarding tuition non-payment and our inability to meet the financial aid requirements of our families.

Having one principal manage multiple facilities is utilized successfully in many school districts, and we expect that doing so in ours will provide advantages in consistency of quality education and operations at the high schools, including: consistency in staff expectations; consistency in student achievement, service and behavior expectations; consistency in curriculum; and effective and efficient operations, just to name a few. The Board reached consensus in support of Father Stasker's proposal and the efforts of our Business Manager to respect the 3-year plan to get "out of debt" submitted to Bishop last year. The 3-year plan and its inherent challenges, including the need for significant personnel changes, was discussed openly and publicly at a Town Hall meeting held at Cathedral Square last November. Bishop, the administration and the Board remain committed to maintaining both high schools as each serves a need in our community. Each will maintain its identity and have daily, on-site leadership. The Board holds to the view that *the school leadership's honorable attempts over the years to serve more than it could afford placed the entire organization at risk and difficult decisions needed to be made now to ensure the future success of our schools.*

Additional information will be distributed regarding our near- and mid-term direction as an organization. Mr. Maj is a proven, gifted and effective leader possessing a high level of understanding of, appreciation for, and commitment to the educational ministry of the Catholic Church. Most of you have already witnessed first-hand his leadership style and approach to student support, which is inspiring, inclusive, honest, realistic, forward-looking and authentically Catholic. Please join me in enthusiastically supporting his ministry as our new leader. His team's success is essential to our future.

In spite of any misgivings you may have about who was chosen to fill a particular role, the manner in which changes were communicated or concerns about the Vision or direction of our schools, the public lack of support for the leadership of our high schools only damages our schools by placing additional pressure on enrollment. It cannot be denied that we, as a Catholic community, can do significant harm to the image of our schools by airing our differences in the media and throughout cyberspace. These sorts of reactions will not hurt those intended to be harmed. They will simply scare away prospective families thereby sealing our fate as an institution.

I am hopeful that the pain and anger expressed in recent days gives way to a community united in support for our leaders dedicated to a brighter future for our schools – a future that will be marked by consistency of approach and financial stability thereby creating higher quality and greater value for our children and grandchildren.

Please continue to pray for those involved in leading our schools. They have incredibly difficult jobs fraught with many challenges – challenges not unlike those being faced in the public and Christian schools in our community. Our Church and its ministries are furthered by our financial support and the support of those trying their best to respect often competing objectives.

Sincerely,

Mark R. Scott
Chairman, Grand Rapids Catholic Secondary Schools Board