

# **Mid-Cycle Visiting Committee Summary Report**

**ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR SCHOOLS  
WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES**

**FOR**

**MARIS STELLA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

**P.O. Box 787**

**Diocese of Caroline Islands, Koror 96940**

**Republic of Palau**

**December 1-4, 2020 Self-Study**

**May 21-22, 2024 Mid-Cycle**

**Hybrid Virtual and Onsite Visit**

**Visiting Committee Members**

Roberta M. Abaday, Chairperson

Adjunct Professor UOG

Retired GDOE Teacher

Guam

Dr. Robert M. Slaby, Ed.D.

Adjunct Associate Professor

Retired Superintendent

Nevada

## SUMMARY

### General comments about the school, including summary of achievement data

Maris Stella Elementary School is the only Catholic elementary school in the Republic of Palau. Located in Koror, the school has two campuses across the street from one another, with grades 1-4 in one building, and Kindergarten and grades 5-8 in the other building. The school offers an academic program with English language arts, mathematics, Palauan language arts, science, social studies, and religion. Extra-curricular programs include physical education/sports, arts and crafts, music/dance, library day, storytelling, and Bible study. The enrollment is 180 students which has decreased over the last five years. There are 85% of the students who are Catholic and the enrollment is 94% Palauan.

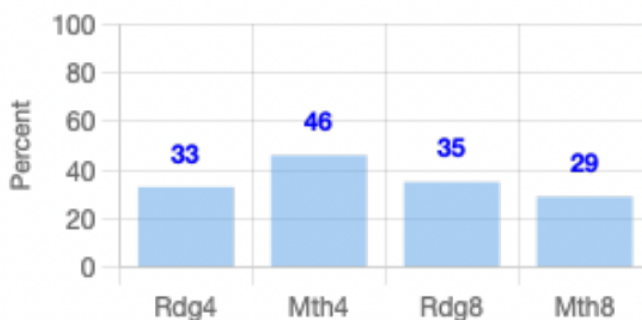
The Expected Student Learning Results (ESLR) are focusing on the same four categories as the neighboring Catholic high school thus providing the foundation for the students to continue their Catholic education. The ESLR expect students to develop in the following:

- Openness to Growth
- Intellectual Competence
- Religious and Spiritual Formation
- Growth in Awareness of Service

All 17 faculty members are female with thirteen Palauan and four Filipina teachers, most with at least an associate degree. About half the teachers have BA degrees and five of the teachers have extensive experience in education at other schools on island. In addition, there are eight staff: principal, vice principal, two secretaries, two maintenance staff, two finance staff, and one librarian, all of them Palauan.

The school uses IOWA tests, provided by the Ministry of Education of Palau, to measure reading and mathematics achievements. The results of the 2023 grades 4 and 8 indicate math and reading are both ranking below the 50 percentile. There was a slight increase for reading. The school selected grades 4 and 8 as representative of the promotion from lower to upper school and from upper to high school.

Figure 1: IOWA 2023 Grade 4 and 8 Percentile Rank



The school report card grades, according to the school analysis, are skewed to the high end with 44% of the students in 2023 receiving an A. The school report identified the need to review both the standardized tests and the report card grades to determine the reason for the disparity.

### **Significant changes and/or developments and their impact on the school**

**1. New WASC Leadership Team:** In November 2023, the leadership team was formulated. There was no specific WASC work on action plans done prior to that date; however, data was gathered for the report.

**2. Governance - Inactive Boards:** Issues include multiple changes to the board membership, lack of involvement, unfamiliarity of the policies and bylaws, lack of understanding of the structure of the Catholic Mission Schools of Palau, and misalignment of foundational documents.

**3. Administration - Change in School Leadership:** Starting in 2021 there was a change in leadership of the school with a new principal, then in 2022 a new vice principal. Additional changes of staff required a restructuring of responsibilities.

**4. Faculty - High faculty turnover:** Multiple new teachers have been hired since 2020. The Mid-Cycle Report lists 34 changes in teachers with hired, retiring, and moving as some of the reasons for the changes.

**5. Staff - High staff turnover:** There are 29 changes to the staff since 2019 with changes in secretaries, administration, and other staff positions.

**6. Physical Improvements:** A new auditorium and Japan language classroom were built and classrooms were renovated. The Japan-Palau Club offers Japanese language classes to the community and the school is able to utilize the room for meetings. Equipment, including tablets for all students and laptops for teachers, were purchased or donated. Additional improvements include a playground set, a music room, and the conversion of rooms for other purposes. Because of the COVID pandemic, handwashing stations were set up. Textbooks for religion and library books, and first aid kits were donated or purchased.

**7. Electronic Report Card System:** Piloted in 2023, it will be adopted and used to maintain school records, gradebooks, and syllabus.

**8. Financial System under review:** A new program is needed for inventory, budgetary planning, and resource management.

**9. Partnerships:** McREL/REL Pacific partnership is providing research-based solutions for teacher effectiveness. The Japan Embassy has provided donations. The Japan-Palau Club and the RAM Corporation gave donations for the construction of a Japan Language Classroom.

### **School's follow-up process and process used to prepare the mid-cycle report**

Work on the Mid-Cycle Report began with the work on the recommendations from 2020 during the summer of 2022. The pandemic limited the participation, but in February 2023 all stakeholders were updated on the priority areas and groups were formulated. Besides teachers and administration, parents, students, and the board were involved in the process, but the excessive change in personnel hampered progress. The school has established a website to keep stakeholders informed of the school's efforts; however, it needs to be updated. There is also a Facebook page. Parents shared that there is a lack of communication or of timely communication to keep them informed of events and school progress. Parents have formed class representatives and group chats

to keep one another informed since the school administration is not always informing the parents of activities or events in a timely manner.

### **Summary of progress on previous action plans**

The last WASC visiting team in 2020, determined seven recommendations. The staff at MSS to varying degrees of success have attempted to implement the recommendations. Only one of the recommendations is addressed in the action plan.

*1. The Maris Stella School and the Catholic Mission should ensure a continuation of the accreditation process through the identification of an accreditation coordinator to monitor the vision.*

After COVID disruptions and staff turnover, a new coordinator came on board in 2023. Subsequently, a leadership team was formed to restart and sustain the process.

*2. The Maris Stella community should ensure that communication of the learning targets and school curriculum is sustained to stakeholders throughout the school year.*

The first part, about 40% of the effort, is completed - gathering all relevant documents and making them easily accessible by stakeholders. The remaining part is to set up processes and establish routines that enable communication.

*3. The Maris Stella faculty and students should work with the ESLR to ensure that upon graduation all students will be able to meet the goals identified in the ESLR. The lack of a data system is a major issue.*

MSS is conducting trials of an electronic report card system which collects some of the needed data. Remaining to be addressed is collection of performance data from external sources such as national achievement tests, curriculum mastery data, and various performance indicator data.

Once the data issue is resolved, MSS needs to identify its performance indicators and establish reporting processes that reveal achievement of ESLR based on the data. The electronic report card system is about 10% of the total effort.

*4. The Maris Stella School faculty and administration should ensure that the curriculum is based on learning targets and standards and support the ESLR.*

One meeting has been held.

*5. The Maris Stella Community should increase communication to all stakeholders.*

The existing paper-based processes (report cards, PTA meetings, informal conversations, etc.), are about 10% of what MSS wants to do. MSS further intends to establish an information system that leverages technology to increase accessibility and transparency and to retain historical records as a matter of routine.

*6. The Maris Stella administration should seek ways to fill all positions in the school.*

In 2021 and 2022, MSS survived a critical shortage of teachers due to natural turnover and Covid related restrictions. Initially addressed with short term volunteers and short-term contracts, the situation was stabilized when the principal, using personal contacts and networking, was able to bring on-board several teachers who had retired from the public school system.

Currently, MSS is in a better position to react to turnovers with non-emergency hiring and has staffed all of its positions fully. Going forward, MSS has to develop a strategy that will enable it to compete with other institutions, primarily the public schools, in attracting and recruiting teachers from the limited national pool.

*7. The Maris Stella School administration, Catholic Mission, and Board of Directors should monitor consistently and purposely enact the action plans in a timely manner.*

The review of the MSS Mid-Cycle Report determined that the seven recommendations have not been significantly implemented nor have been appropriately monitored.

### **Schoolwide Action Plan**

The previous action plans focused on a plan to provide academic excellence, improve communication, provide professional development, ensure fiscal responsibility, and continue learning in a pandemic situation.

During the Mid-Cycle review it was determined that the five goals of the previous action plans were never implemented. However, with the new leadership team, three major areas of weakness were identified. They are addressed in the three goals of the action plan; however, addressing student needs or increasing student achievement were not the focus of the goals.

The areas of weakness as identified by the leadership team:

1. The two boards (Board of Members and Board of Directors) were unfamiliar with their responsibilities and the corresponding documents.
2. Recruitment and retention of school leadership, staff, and faculty.
3. Inadequate knowledge, understanding, alignment, and application of ESLR.

The first goal undertakes the formation of the board and subsequent coaching of the board's responsibilities. To clarify, the school has a Board of Members, appointed by the Bishop and a Board of Directors, who oversee management and financial decisions concerning the school. The goal is to be consistent with the mission and values of Catholic Mission Schools in Palau. In the Mindszenty High School action plan, the MHS board is considering the establishment of a joint board of members between the MHS and MSS.

The second goal deals with the financial structure of MSS. The focus is to recruit and retain teachers and school staff. The need for teacher professional development is also an objective. Both goals will mean additional costs to the school and the Catholic Mission.

The third goal addresses one of the previous WASC recommendations, that of embedding ESLR in the instructional program. Initially, there will be a study by the entire MSS community to determine the relevance and effectiveness of the ESLR. Increased communication of the ESLR

is a goal through the PTA. An additional growth target is for the curriculum to support the ESLR and for students upon graduation to have achieved the goals of the ESLR.

The Visiting Committee discussed the lack of student friendly language in the ESLR and were informed that the ESLR were not selected by the elementary school but were provided by the Board of Members to follow the ESLR of the high school. It is suggested that the school continue its process of reviewing the ESLR to determine how best to integrate them into an elementary setting and to make the necessary revisions.

The meeting with the parents, staff, teachers, and students provided insight into the school culture and concerns. It would benefit the school leadership team to meet with the various groups in an open discussion. The parents confirmed that MSS effectively provides their children with a foundation in the Catholic faith, provides individual attention through the small class sizes, and teaches their Palauan language and culture. On the other hand, the parents and the Board of Directors stated that academically, the students are not achieving or meeting high standards and that assistance is not provided by all teachers. Parents stated they would like to know how the subjects are taught in the classroom so that they can assist with homework. There is a need for professional development in innovative strategies, in differentiated instruction specifically for students with special needs, in student-centered instruction, and in content knowledge to provide better instruction. Teachers and parents would benefit from strategies on specific topics, like Singapore math, homework assignments, behavioral concerns.

The observations of the classrooms and the meetings with the Board of Directors, students, and teachers indicated that the resources are in need of updating, specifically textbooks. While the school facilities are air conditioned and are in good condition, some of the textbooks are outdated and there is a need for upgrading the computer lab, including printers. Students stated that they receive help from their teachers and the teachers confirmed that they try to provide tutoring with the limited time available. Some of the students have taken it upon themselves to provide peer tutoring. The students were confident, well-spoken, and felt a sense of community.

An increase in communication was identified as a need across the board by the adult groups. The Board of Directors confirmed the desire to create a joint Board for the two Catholic schools. They also recognize the need to review, refine, and update the board documents, to schedule regular meetings, to review the financial situation including tuition (rate and collection) and teacher salaries, and to increase commitment and involvement of the community. The teachers have PLC meetings but would like to see more vertical alignment. Professional development on technology integration and innovative strategies to address heterogeneous grouping would benefit teachers and students. Overall the teachers and parents were able to see growth in the children as they developed their skills over the years at Maris Stella Elementary School.

During the meeting, the Board of Directors had begun making concrete plans for improvement. With a clear vision and collaborative leadership, the next three years should see improvement. The teachers and staff provide dedication and commitment, not only to the students, but to the school leaders. The Maris Stella Elementary School Leadership Team and Board of Directors expressed confidence in the current leadership and the expected progress towards school improvement.

### **Schoolwide Strengths**

1. The leadership team for embracing the self-study and identifying three site weaknesses and addressing the weaknesses in the new action plan.
2. For the leadership team in identifying the need to recruit and retain teachers and school staff and the necessity of teacher professional development.
3. The Parents and the Catholic community for making every effort to provide a Catholic education to the elementary grade levels.
4. The Parents are open and recognize the problems at the school while being strongly supportive of a Catholic education.
5. The teaching staff, while encountering many barriers, remain positive and focused on instruction of Christian values and the Palauan culture and language.

### **Growth Areas for Continuous Improvement: The visiting committee concurs with the school's identified areas for growth:**

1. The Board of Members and Board of Directors need to identify responsibilities, implement training and coaching, and align the mission and values of MSS with the Catholic Mission Schools in Palau, to support the endeavors of Maris Stella Elementary School.
2. The Boards, administration, and the Catholic community need to address the turnover, the recruitment, and retention of school leadership, staff, and faculty to ensure there is educational support for learning.
3. The leadership team and faculty need to examine the ESLRs, to embed them in the instructional program and through open communication inform all stakeholders of the importance of achieving the ESLR.

### **Additional Areas for Growth:**

1. The MSS Board of Directors need to develop a long-term strategic plan that focuses on the future culture and finances of the school.
2. MSS should consider if the Expected Student Learning Results reflect the students, if they are designed in age-appropriate language, and if they are measurable.
3. MSS leadership should seek ways to provide professional development for teachers in differentiated instruction, strategies for special needs students, integration of technology, and innovative methods to provide a student-centered classroom.
4. MSS leadership, through the school improvement process, needs to provide consistency, clear goals, and directions connected to toward student achievement.