

Baltimore County schools thrive in merger

BY EMILY ROSENTHAL

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OVERLEA – Two weeks before the newly merged St. Michael-St. Clement School opened its doors for 2017-18, faculty and staff were gearing up for the inaugural year.

Construction crews finished improvements while technology kinks were being fixed, and boxes lined the halls. Meanwhile, Paul Kristoff and Jane Towery were preparing to begin the year as co-principals.

“Just to get the doors open on the first day of school was a minor miracle,” Kristoff said.

Kristoff and Towery were principals of the former St. Michael the Archangel School in Overlea and St. Clement Mary Hofbauer School in Rosedale, respectively. When the Archdiocese of Baltimore announced the schools’ merger in November 2016, they were asked to lead the new institution side-by-side.

“When you are a principal, you’re

responsible for every part of your school building,” Towery said, adding that they would have to “blend” duties. “We worked really hard to ... present a unified administration and approach.”

Many responsibilities were divided: budget and finance fall under Towery’s jurisdiction, and facilities under Kristoff’s. Kristoff is responsible for the day-to-day operations in the upper-school building (grades four to eight) and Towery for those of the lower-school building (preK-3 to grade three).

The partnership caused them to step back during decision-making to consider the other’s perspective, and has earned them nicknames from their faculty and staff: “Mom” and “Dad.”



Upper-school principal Paul Kristoff and lower-school principal Jane Towery are in their first year of leadership at the newly combined St. Michael-St. Clement School in Overlea.

“You really do have to have a good, close relationship,” Towery said.

Kristoff said, “There’s no way that this could have been done this year if there weren’t two of us.”

Kristoff and Towery have been addressing the many changes associated with merging schools, including the \$1.2 million archdiocesan grant, which went to school improvements and renovations. In addition, thanks to a grant from the Marion I. and Henry J. Knott Foundation, the school now boasts 1:1 technology for all students.

Students in pre-K through second grade utilize iPads as supplemental educational tools. Meanwhile, students in the third through eighth grades are issued a Dell Chromebook. “We have hired a full-time technology teacher and it’s been great to see students so excited about learning, especially (with) our 3-D printers, robotics and drones,” said Kristoff.

“We are now a school that offers 21st-century technology, we have a virtual reality sandbox, a new Makerspace



St. Michael-St. Clement School fourth-graders Skylar Spencer, from left, John Nwokoroku and Ben Fugate and technology teacher Bryan White use an augmented-reality sandbox to study science at the Overlea school.

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St. Michael-St. Clement School eighth-grader Marris Tribble smiles during language arts class.

Overlea

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STEM lab and renovated a science lab," he said. "Our primary classrooms offer smart projectors and our upper-school classrooms are equipped with Apple TVs, all to benefit the students."

The school was moved to the buildings at St. Michael's campus, which was larger and in better shape than St. Clement's.

Serving the communities of Overlea and Rosedale since the 1920s to 1930s, the schools were traditionally neighborhood-driven – now, St. Michael-St. Clement's nearly 400 students hail from 35 ZIP codes.

"We spent a lot of time talking about community. We really wanted to build a community of educators, a community of staff. We want everybody to feel welcome and part (of the school) – students as well as adults," Towery said.

"With the merger, you can hold onto traditions from both schools. It's definitely a worthwhile model," Kristoff said. "We always say that together we are stronger than separate."

This summer, a picture of the first graduating class of St. Michael-St. Clement will be added to those from the former schools that line the hallways.

"Through it all, the easiest part of this whole thing have been the children. They came in the first day and it was seamless for them," Kristoff said. "The children have been fantastic." •

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