



Ursuline Sisters of the Central Province Office of Mission and Identity

Ursuline Identity Assessment Cycle II 2020-2024

Mount Merici Academy, Waterville, Maine
May 3-5, 2023
Visiting Team Report

Link to Self-Study Report UIA Slide Presentation

Visiting Team

Alicia Brannan - Ursuline Academy, New Orleans, LA - Third Grade Teacher
Karen Mortillaro - Central Province - Director of Mission and Identity
Yvonne Racine - Ursuline Academy, Dedham, MA - Theology Department Chairperson

General Overview and Observations of Visit

The Ursuline Identity Assessment Cycle II began at Mount Merici Academy in the Fall of 2022. Led by Head of School, Tina St. Pierre, and Director of Mission and Theology, Stacy Shoulta, the Steering Committee focused on four of the Essential Characteristics of an Ursuline school in the self-study process. The report was submitted to the Office of Mission and Identity in April 2023.

The Visiting Team met via Zoom twice to review the assessment process, details of the visit, and the initial review of the self-study Slide Presentation full of beautiful pictures of students and co-workers and their "little school on the hill." The Visiting Team members met in person on the evening of May 3 to organize the visit and begin a detailed discussion of the self-study and visit.

Upon arriving on campus for the first visit day, the Visiting Team immediately felt welcomed by administrators standing at the front door as they welcome all students each morning. The day began, as every day does at MMA, with a reflection and prayer read over the PA. While all classrooms have a prayer table which is used in different ways depending on the grade level, it was clear that community prayer is also valued at Mount Merici. We were then treated to a tour by two Student Ambassadors who showed the deep pride they feel in their school. The second visit day began with the "Friday Assembly" which is a weekly gathering time to announce good things happening and award that week's "Serviam Award" recipients. There was hardly a dry eye in the house as students sang their school song, described how their peers "lived their

Serviam heart,” and recognized teachers who go above and beyond for their students. We were blessed to witness such love, loyalty, and community. Over the two-day visit, the Visiting Team had the opportunity to visit classes of all grade levels, enjoy a lively conversation over lunch with the enthusiastic eighth-grade class, and participate in several focus groups with students, faculty, parents, board members, alumni, and school administration. It is abundantly evident in our time with so many constituents that being loved and supported is central to being a member of this community. Students feel heard and valued by their teachers, alumni feel prepared for the next stages of their life, faculty feel they have a strong peer community, and parents appreciate that their children are truly happy each day and are encouraged to strive to fulfill their potential.

- Students are well-spoken, confident, mature, and proud to be a part of the Mount Merici family. In their own words:
 - Mount Merici teaches students and shows them God loves them. And they do it well!
 - As a new student, I felt welcomed and became an ambassador to show people my new school.
 - We will keep doing service at the food pantry because we have been going for so long that we can't stop now!
 - I joined the Head of School Advisory Committee so my voice could be heard. (This student is hoping for more meetings so she can make a difference.)
 - We feel free to discuss our opinions with our teachers. We are respected BIG TIME!
 - Teachers love what they teach. This year [in Middle School] is the best!
 - When they change stuff it's because they care. [discussing the new Honor Code]
 - We are people too. Our voice gets heard.
 - We form strong bonds with each other and teachers.
 - Mount Merici is SUPERCALIFRAGILISTICEXPIALIDOCIOUS!
 - We wouldn't change anything [about the school]; there are too many awesome things!
 - When I help someone, I feel it here first. (pointing to her heart)

- Faculty have welcoming, respectful relationships with one another and feel that someone “always has their back.” They are devoted to the students and “love them where they are.” They incorporate the Catholic faith into all classroom activities and show students how to lead with their hearts. They recognized the importance of the students seeing that the teachers pray too and are leading by example. They spoke often of the school community as a family and repeatedly used the word “welcoming” to describe it.

- Alumni who returned to their beloved alma mater shared that they always felt welcomed, comfortable, connected with their peers and teachers, and at home at Mount Merici. Most in the focus group are currently in Waterville public high schools and are keenly aware of the advanced education they received while at MMA. They noted the values of courtesy and respect for their peers and elders instilled in them by their teachers at

Mount Merici. They credit their education at Mount Merici giving them the desire to get involved in their school and the larger community and be strong and secure in who they are. They feel they are easily becoming good adults because they have such a good foundation. Often they hear from a teacher in high school, "Awesome, you're an MMA kid! You'll be such a good example for others." At Mount Merici, they were encouraged academically, emotionally, and socially.

- Parents had the highest praise for "teachers who genuinely care about students and communicate well." Teachers implement a structure and tone that fosters students' respect for one another, brings out their strengths, and encourages them to strive to reach their potential. In a post-pandemic world, parents are longing for a return to more frequent involvement in their children's school experience such as chaperoning field trips. They also expressed willingness to help with minor maintenance issues such as painting. They are excited about a return to the volunteer hour requirement for parents next year and hope to better offer their time, talent, and treasure to the school. Lastly, while the administration provides much communication through emails and newsletters and hosts regular opportunities for parents to meet with them on topics of concern, parents expressed a desire to feel their voices are being heard and for greater transparency on how fundraising dollars are used and the reasons for decisions that are made.
- The Board of Trustees was unified in their assessment of the current strengths and challenges facing Mount Merici. They recognized the strong academic tradition at Mount Merici and the unique heritage of the Ursuline spirit. Board Members, in collaboration with school leaders, identified three main challenges: a need for increased parent involvement, focused fundraising to help sustain the school, and increased enrollment. They exhibited positive energy and enthusiasm, and are invested in bringing more stability to the school. They acknowledged this will be a long journey and have already started by engaging parents with a town hall meeting. The Board benefits from long-standing members with institutional knowledge, as well as those members who bring a fresh perspective.

Endorsement of Strengths

Essential Characteristic 2: *An Ursuline school nurtures a strong spiritual formation for its students and co-workers, one that cultivates the faith development of all its constituencies.*

At Mount Merici Academy, this occurs through:

- Administrative level
 - Hiring a full-time Director of Mission and Theology and a Catholic head of school
- Students
 - All students being taught from well-established Catholic faith curricula (Pflaum and Loyola Press)

- Teaching about St. Angela beginning with the youngest students and continuing through all grades
- All students taking part in Serviam activities. Examples: collecting items for the Humane Society and food pantry; making cards for nursing home residents; taking part in projects to learn about food waste, recycling and sustainability
- Coworkers
 - Faculty and staff regularly participating in community service in the spirit of Serviam
 - All coworkers being formally commissioned to uphold the Ursuline/Catholic tradition
 - All coworkers participating in an Angela retreat to support the understanding of St. Angela's life and spirituality
 - All coworkers and volunteers participating in Protecting God's Children training
- Whole community
 - Use of symbols, sacramentals and prayer tables throughout the school to support the practice of the Catholic faith
 - Making prayer an important part of every day. Examples: morning prayer, grace before meals, regular opportunities for prayer intentions
 - Regular celebration of Mass
 - Service projects that involve families of students to serve the local community, such as collecting items for the local teen parent program, food pantry and homeless shelter
 - Recognizing and celebrating the good work of coworkers and students through a weekly assembly

Essential Characteristic 5: *An Ursuline school forms and supports a nurturing family/community spirit.*

At Mount Merici Academy, this occurs through:

- Families participate in weekly Friday morning assemblies
- Families invited to all masses on campus
- Parent volunteers in fundraising and classroom events
- Families participate in the annual Harvest Fair, book fairs, and other school events
- Parents drive students to community service events and serve alongside students
- Recent alumni return to celebrate their high school graduation
- Small class size fosters deep, personal teacher-student and teacher-family relationships
- Community service at every grade level
- Collaboration and co-curricular activities between different age groups - play, art projects, science models, etc.
- Student Ambassadors welcome guests and provide information

- Big-Little Buddy program - Mass buddies
- Remember the greater Ursuline community with common Ursuline songs, 4th-grade pen pals from France, and historical exhibits
- Actively working to develop a relationship with the Merici Woods community - an elderly housing residence
- 8th-grade class visits the Ursuline Museum when they go to Quebec

Essential Characteristic 6: *An Ursuline school promotes faith-based living and leadership in a global community while striving for peace and justice.*

At Mount Merici Academy, this occurs through:

- "Common good is a pervasive theme at Mount Merici Academy."
- Service at the Waterville Area Soup Kitchen and Waterville Food Pantry
- Staff volunteer day (Starting in 2022-2023, staff will have at least two volunteer days/year)
- Big & Little Buddies Program allows junior high students to take leadership roles with younger students
- Service to their own community in the Mount Merici garden shows Serviam in action and respect for the environment
- Teaching conflict resolution strategies gives students non-violent ways to handle issues while teaching them compassion, empathy, and respect for differences
- Focusing on the core values of respect for the uniqueness of the individual and the development of the whole person allows students to learn to work for justice for all

Essential Characteristic 8: *An Ursuline school instills academic excellence while inspiring intellectual curiosity.*

At Mount Merici Academy, this occurs through:

- NEASC accreditation
- Alignment of curriculum
- Math Team
- Field trip to local museums and colleges to explore fine arts
- Celebration of success in addition to growth and improvement
- Project-based research projects
- Use of alternative assessments
- Prayer tables in each classroom
- Encouraging students to share their aspirations, plans, and interests through such things as the Kindergarten's VIP tradition
- A close-knit school community that focuses on having each child be "truly seen"
- Celebrations of academic and extracurricular activities
- Students achieving accelerated status when entering high school

There is no doubt what was observed and experienced by the Visiting Team was a strong affirmation of what the self-study contained and a strong confirmation of the Catholic and Ursuline identity of Mount Merici Academy.

Recognition of Challenges/Opportunities for Growth

- In the current reality of fewer practicing Catholics, we recognize the challenge of sustaining your Catholic identity. Continue your efforts to strengthen the retreat programs, offer sacrament preparations, increase the frequency of masses/prayer services, etc.
- In recognizing the challenge of balancing the safety of students with the parents' desire to be more actively involved in their children's school day, continue exploring new ways to include parents in projects such as targeted fundraising for specific needs and tasks such as painting. This will utilize their expertise and foster a deeper sense of community among a wider group of families. While information is readily available to the school community through emails, newsletters, etc., and administrators are available during weekly coffee groups and town hall meetings, improving the culture of communication with more transparency and collaboration with all constituents will enhance a nurturing family and community spirit.
- Considering the lack of diversity in the demographics of the Waterville area, there is a challenge in exposing students to various experiences. Continue striving to present different cultures, faiths, and traditions to facilitate conversations about the uniqueness of all individuals and prepare students to be global citizens who work for peace and justice.
- In an epidemic of bullying, Mount Merici has worked to create a respectful and compassionate community where differences are valued and bullying issues are minor. Continue your efforts to create a clear anti-bullying policy that is communicated and enforced with the entire school community.
- Continue developing a database to compile and track your rich alumni network. This will allow for not only better opportunities for current students and to attract alumni to open positions but also will allow for more giving once a deeper relationship is developed.

Concluding Statement

This report was written collaboratively by the Visiting Team, all of whom offer unanimous consent and agreement. We overwhelmingly confirm the strong Ursuline Identity that is a lived reality at Mount Merici Academy. The Visiting Team wishes to thank the entire community for all that you did to prepare for our visit and for your genuine hospitality while we were on your campus. We each consider it an honor and blessing to have served on this Visiting Team and have the experience of connecting with the administrators, faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and trustees. This completes our work as a Visiting Team. Mount Merici Academy will remain in our thoughts and prayers as you continue to "cultivate the vine entrusted to you."

Karen Mortillaro

Karen Mortillaro - In the name of the Visiting Team
May 23, 2023