

# Musings from the Family Corner

## St. Ann's middle school program: an experiential success

By Tonya Talbert

Two years ago right now, I was in full-on panic mode, and it had nothing to do with Christmas. I had just received a letter from River Bluff Middle School regarding our upcoming transfer, and I wasn't sure whether St. Ann's would be able to add the new seventh grade class in time for Josie to attend. I knew that if St. Ann's didn't add seventh and eighth grade that it wouldn't be the end of the world. She would have attended River Bluff and, because of the solid foundation she had received at St. Ann's, she would have been *fine*. But when it comes to my children, *fine* just doesn't cut it anymore. I know how hard it is to focus on academics when peer pressure gets in the way – I remember. And I just didn't want that sort of “normal” experience for my own kids. I wanted a choice.

Fast forward to March of the following year after meetings and letters and lots of time put in by the St. Ann's administration and faculty, and it all fell into place. Joan and the parish's education commission and finance council gave us the good news: We would give it a try.

For the past year and a half, Josie and 11 other students have been attending our St. Ann's “middle school.” Granted, the current class size is a bit smaller than parents had originally hoped for, but that has seemed to work out okay. While we don't have many *extracurriculars* at this point, the kids don't seem to mind at all. They enjoy working on the yearbook, acting in the play, and participating in a variety of community service opportunities that get them out and about in the community, making a difference. Most of our students also participate in sports, 4-H, or music lessons outside of school, so their time is limited, too.

Although I have always known my kids are receiving a state-of-the-art education at St. Ann's, it really hit home when I heard the composite ITBS test scores for the upper-grades. At the beginning of eighth grade, our students had an average composite score of grade equivalent 13+. After talking to other teachers, I found that all St. Ann's classes scored well above the national norm (of schools across the country that use the standardized ITBS tests) and placed 1 to 2 years ahead of grade level. Additionally, our administration and faculty have been charged with creating a Diocesan-wide standardized report card to ensure all schools in our diocese meet such high expectations.

While I understand that these tests can't be taken solely as a measure of future academic success or classroom competence, I believe they do show the intensity of our curriculum and the positive outcome of our safe and child-centered learning environment. Our technology education curriculum is the envy of many area schools as our kids are creating lively interactive reports with programs such as Hyperstudio, Google presentations, and Prezi. With the addition of 25 Asus tablets, all students can take advantage of video possibilities through Skype and Google Chat. Our “Words Your Way” spelling program is brand new – and soon to be adopted by the local district. The Foss Science Kits have kids doing experiments in the lab by first grade, and with our math program, they start learning algebraic thought processes around that time, as well. In addition, the accessibility of our teachers is unheard of. I can't tell you the number of times Kara Roisum has returned a late-night instant message from Josie and talked her through a homework issue. Kara is not the exception to St. Ann teachers either. She is the norm. To our faculty, each child is truly a gift from God, and they are nurtured as such. As an aide and as a parent, I have seen this many times.

I believe I speak for the majority when I say that the St. Ann's middle school experience has been all that we had hoped for as parents. Our children have become well-rounded Christian adolescents, and I have no worries about their ability to make good choices at the high school level. These kids have a strong sense of morality and social responsibility; they are articulate in their beliefs and self-disciplined in their work; and they are confident in their abilities. What more could we ask?