

THE THIRD DECADE: 1985–1994

An examination of student enrollment at St. John's at the end of 1984 reflected some worrying demographic changes in the Brussels region. A slight but continuing drop in the American population was accompanied by a small increase in the British population. St. John's had been accommodating British families by offering GCE 'O' (Ordinary) level courses, but not 'A' (Advanced) level courses, which were required for entrance to British universities. Consequently, several families were obliged, albeit reluctantly, to withdraw their children. They were wary of entrusting their children to a new and relatively untried examination system—the International Baccalaureate (IB). In 1979, St. John's had adopted the IB; excellent results followed. It was not only for American and, potentially British, university entrance but also for the examination requirements of other students represented by the 30 nationalities making up the school population. A further complication arose in that the proposals for the new British General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) due to be in place in 1988, would have implications for the existing GCE program. It had become imperative to build a thorough understanding of the IB program in the St. John's community. Research on IB students seeking university entrance in the UK showed that there was little disadvantage to the student with that diploma, and that knowledge and understanding of the new examination was increasing yearly among UK university admissions officers. This was amply borne out two years later when two St. John's IB graduates were accepted by Oxford and Cambridge universities.

St. John's began a critical restructuring in 1985, involving a study of the creation of a Middle School program designed to meet the unique intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual needs of students in Grades 5 to 8. In January, the new proposal was presented to the faculty. Because of mixed reaction and lack of consensus among the staff, the discussion of this proposal continued into February. However, after several meetings and re-evaluations, including a decision to drop Grade 5 from the proposal, the plans went ahead for a Grade 6–8 Middle School. A letter was prepared announcing the new venture to the St. John's community, and it was agreed that Sr. Barbara and Ms. Christine Waggoner would attend the annual conference of the Middle School Association, which St. John's had joined. Further research into Middle Schools was planned for the fall with visits to London and Dusseldorf. In October, evaluation teams from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and from the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) arrived at St. John's on accreditation visits for the High School. Everything went well, and the results were awaited with interest.

Space for expansion was an ongoing problem. By September 1985, it had become a matter of urgency. The school needed an Elementary School music room and, because of a new Belgian law, both smoking and non-smoking lounges were required for all three teaching faculties. The recently acquired Blangy property was surveyed in order to prepare estimates for remodelling and electrical work. As a brain-storming exercise over possible uses of the premises, the faculty was invited to visit the house and submit their suggestions. However, the house was later deemed unsuitable for student or faculty purposes, and permission was sought from the FCJ to carry out demolition of the property. The extensive garden of this site was to become the eventual location for the new Middle School building.

In January 1986, the faculty refined the Middle School program and the adjustments necessary for the Elementary School, which would lose Grade 6. Work was also done on responses to the Middle States re-accreditation report, which had recently been received.

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The words “INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL” were added to the lettering on the front of the building. In May the same year, the High School received both ECIS and Middle States re-accreditation; Sr. Barbara was subsequently presented with a plaque at the ECIS Annual Conference in November in Montreux. In June the same year, St. John’s hosted a very successful Learning Disabilities Conference sponsored by ECIS.

Before the school closed for the summer vacation, new administrative appointments were announced. Ms. Carol Esposito, who had been Principal of the Elementary School, was appointed Assistant Superintendent, with specific responsibilities for admissions and public relations. Mr. Jack Lyons replaced the High School Principal, Br. Emmet O’Neil FSC, who was returning to the United States. Sr. Beatrice Molyneux FCJ was appointed Principal of the Elementary School and Ms. Christine Waggoner became Principal of the Middle School.

Throughout the fall of 1986, work continued apace on the development of the Middle School program, and in January 1987, an important Middle School conference, the first European League of Middle Level Education, took place in the Sheraton Hotel Brussels. As a result of this conference, St. John’s Middle School was featured as “exemplary” in a magazine published by the National Resource Centre for Middle School Education. Dr. Paul George from the University of Florida, an expert on Middle Schools, visited St. John’s over a period of several days and delivered a highly complimentary report to the administration. It was generally agreed that the new program was now indeed a significant success.

A major step forward influencing the long-term future development of the school began with an invitation to Dr. G. Collins, former Assistant Commissioner of Education for the State of Massachusetts, to visit St. John’s. Dr. Collins spent four days at the school in March 1987. He encouraged administration and faculty to formulate long range plans to prepare for the years leading up to the new millennium and beyond, and he emphasized the need to prepare for a more technical society. More specifically, Dr. Collins recommended expansion of the existing library facilities and the introduction of more computers into the classrooms. He advised against allowing programs to be influenced by restrictions of space. Dr. Collins remarked that the spirit of friendliness that permeated all facets of school life at St. John’s was an enviable and precious commodity to be nurtured as the school moved into the future.

The 25th anniversary of St. John’s was formally celebrated throughout the school year 1989–90 and brought together friends, patrons and former students across a spectrum of 25 years. There was a splendid Gala dinner dance for 320 guests at the Metropole Hotel in Brussels in January. In December of the same year, 40 past students, including one going back to 1976, attended the alumni reunion at school. The highlight of these celebrations was a 25th Jubilee Mass of Thanksgiving celebrated by Cardinal Godfried Danneels, Cardinal/Archbishop of Brussels/Malines, in St. Joseph’s Church, Waterloo in February 1990. It was during this period that St. John’s had to bid farewell to John J. (Jack) Devlin who was retiring to the USA from his job with Procter and Gamble after 25 years of extraordinarily devoted service to the school from its foundation. Jack had filled many positions including PTA President, Vice Chairman and Chairman of the Advisory Board, of which he was made Honorary trustee for life. Jack was also founder of “Family Day,” the annual event to help the St. John’s scholarship fund. Twenty-five years had passed, and the little school that started in Montjoie was poised on the threshold of the new decade leading to the millennium.

In September 1990, Mr. Ken Hokenson made a presentation to the faculty, Advisory Board, the Parent Teacher Association and administration concerning St. John’s need for strategic planning in order to prepare for the challenge of the 21st century. Mr. Hokenson felt that St. John’s was ready for this action, and the Board decided to commence the planning process. In February 1991, after a workshop with Mr. Hokenson, the Strategic Planning Task Force, headed by Ms. Gloria Labeau, a parent, began its formal operations.

In December 1991, Ms. Carol Esposito said goodbye to St. John’s as she embarked on the next stage of her professional career by joining the ECIS staff. The job of putting St. John’s on the “educational map” and attracting new students had been a primary objective for

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the school since the mid-80s and, initially, Carol undertook the task in her role as Assistant Superintendent. With the economic downturn about this time, the weak dollar and the movement of companies out of Belgium, St. John's, in common with other international schools across Europe, experienced a fall in enrollment, which had to be matched by a reduction in costs. By 1989, the trend seemed to have been reversed, but it had been a worrying experience for the administration. There were now 600 students on roll, as new programs, cross-cultural visits, exhibitions, marketing, revamped public relations material and meetings with the business community began to bear fruit.

June 1992 saw the departure of Ms. Christine Waggoner, who was returning to the USA after 13 years at St. John's. Christine had been responsible for setting the Middle School on its foundations in an international setting. Two new administrators were appointed for September 1992. Mr. Dennis McCann was appointed High School Principal to replace Mr. Jack Lyons, who assumed the newly established job of Director of Development and Alumni Affairs. Mr. John Lepetit took over the position of Middle School Principal. Jack Lyons commenced his new role mainly from his home and office in the USA. His major task was to establish an Alumni Association, locating as many graduates and former parents and students as possible, planning reunions and editing *The Lions' Pride*, the alumni magazine, while developing ways in which alumni could help St. John's sustain its excellent programs.

By June 1992, the Strategic Plan had been completed and presented to the Board, who accepted the recommendations in broad outline and decided on priorities to be worked on during 1992–93. The Advisory Board attended a workshop in September 1992 under the leadership of Ms. Gloria Labeau, whose services were retained to guide the implementation of the Strategic Plan. The six areas of involvement were administration, fiscal management, facilities management, instructional programs, personnel and volunteer recruitment. Coinciding with this work, St. John's was involved in a self-study, having applied the previous year to ECIS and the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges for accreditation, nursery through Grade 13. Although High School had been accredited for 18 years and the Elementary School for 10 years, the present Middle School had been split between High School and Elementary School. Happily for those involved in both processes, there was a good deal of overlap between the self-study and the Strategic Plan Task Force. On 3 October 1992, a group of 16 teachers and administrators from 16 different schools in Europe and the USA arrived for a five-day visit. The team members were impressed at the outset that St. John's had already initiated a strategic plan showing that it was desirous of shaping its own future with purpose. In January 1993, official schoolwide re-accreditation was received.

Meanwhile, the building plans went on apace. The new Kindergarten had been opened in the spring of 1991 and, in a dedication ceremony, was given the name St. Luke's Hall. A large new cafeteria (formerly a printing plant) on Champ du Roussart was in service by January 1992. In April, the plans for the proposed new Middle School building were presented to the Board by architect Sonya Kundi, Class of '84, St. John's. With improved relationships with local neighborhood objectors, the commune of Waterloo and the province at Wavre, the school felt confident regarding the building of the art gallery and classrooms (on the site of a former ferme on the Champ du Roussart), the excavation of the underground car park, and the construction of the flagship Middle School building. By the fall of 1994, all of these objectives had been achieved and on 6 October 6, a gala concert, in celebration of the 30th anniversary of St. John's, was held in St. Joseph's Church Waterloo.