

**St. Mary's Academy Charter School  
Beeville, Texas**



**TRANSCRIPT: “ST. MARY’S CHARTER SCHOOL STORY”**

**NOREEN BROWN, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL:** This charter school began with a dream that someone had many years ago of doing something good for the community. Our school was the oldest Catholic school in Beeville. When the naval base closed, all of a sudden the Catholic schools were unable to function as well as they should because they were lacking money. Father came one day and told us that he was thinking of closing the school—heartbreaking news for all of us. Coming through the front door was a former student of mine and she came to see what she could do to help. I said, “Do you know anything about a charter?” And she said, “Oh yes,” and we began that very night. And in six weeks we had written a charter and we took it to Austin. It was almost as if we had a guiding hand the entire time.

Our original mission for St. Mary’s Academy Charter School was that we needed to establish a challenging curriculum for the students and that curriculum was to be taught in a very safe, nurturing, and educational environment where our children would feel free to reach their fullest potential. Most of our families are one-parent families; the father is absent. Many of our families are of low socio-economic income. Many of our children live with grandparents, live with aunts and uncles. We have three large prisons in an area of 105 miles. We have families that have either a father, or an uncle or a grandfather in the prison themselves; the rest of the family moves to be near them. Unfortunately, many children have their mothers also in prison.

**STAN SIMONSEN, PRINCIPAL/SUPERINTENDENT:** The first year what we found out was we did not have nearly as much knowledge as we thought we had. Many of us knew a lot about instruction. We’d all been teachers, we knew instruction; some of us knew administration from a principal’s point of view, but from a business office and a public school accountability system, we did not know a thing.

One of our jobs the first year was making sure that the staff didn’t try and teach religion. We are a public school, so we have to adhere to the rules regarding being secular, not being a religious institution. So I think for most of our staff that was one of the hardest things they ever had to do.

When we became a charter school and opened up, the first year we had 180 kids which was more children than we actually had seats for. We’ve added students every year since then. We start with an open enrollment. If you are already here you have a two-week window to register and your siblings, or anyone who lives in your household, can come in. Once we have those slots filled, we have the community enrollment, which lasts two weeks. Normally what happens is for 10 slots we have 30 parents wanting a child in, so then we have a lottery. We have a waiting list then that’s fairly substantial. Rather than bring in 20 kids, which we could, just to

have money, we elected to not bring anybody in now. Right now 350 would be the maximum we can be paid for.

We raise money through grants. We work in partnerships with anyone who will work in a partnership with us. We will work with the local library, the local art museum; everyone's willing to work with us. We are a frugal group. We have a strong business manager. Before we buy something we get buy-in. When I have teachers say that I want x, I will say, "Tell me how you have used everything we have up until now, and tell me how this is going to improve instruction." If they can tell me that then we'll find a way to buy it. One thing we do, though, is we have a grant from a local family to help us buy library books every year. I think literature can drive lots of other parts of the curriculum.

Our board's role is oversight. Some of the people still on the board were here when it was a Catholic school and some of them were part of founding the charter school and have a strong sense of ownership. Initially, the teachers saw the board as a group that was telling them "No." It took a while for the teachers to realize that the board is here in governance. They have a duty, a fiduciary duty, to make sure the money is handled properly and all of our programs are implemented properly. The board approves the budget and then they hold us accountable to live within the budget, and the teachers have input into how we decide the budget. It's been a maturity, I think, on everyone's part, that we have to take a long look at what we are going to do.

**SUSAN CHINCARINI, BUSINESS MANAGER:** Stan and I think are risk-averse and so we tend to budget on the conservative side. Because of that we were able to build up reserves each year, which helped us acquire our building that we have now. We try real hard to make sure we stay within that budget. It's sometimes hard because charters traditionally don't get as much money as regular districts and we don't get facilities allotments to help with facilities, so we try really hard to funnel as much money into the classroom as possible to give the teachers all the tools that they need, the training that they need to do their jobs really well.

**VOICE OF A SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER:** We, as a school board, try to stay on policy and let the administration take care of administration and let the teachers take care of the classroom, so the whole aspect of dividing the leadership, so that each person keeps their aspect. There's a very fine fiscal officer who maintains the budget and is very hard-nosed about it. We don't necessarily have to worry about the budget. We follow it but she maintains it and keeps it. St. Mary's Academy gives parents an educational alternative to be able to select the best school possible for their child and to have the best amount of services for their child. We were extremely honored to be named a Blue Ribbon School, but we didn't go out to become a Blue Ribbon School. We came out for the children and in the process somebody said, "You did very good work," and we got a Blue Ribbon for it, for which we're greatly honored. But we were here for the children first.

**ALICE WHITLEY, READING COORDINATOR K – 3:** I think St. Mary's could sustain this, because if we can keep doing what we have been doing, given the right personalities and the right leadership, it can be done. Good business leadership—we have an excellent business and financial director. It's people, it is definitely people.

STAN SIMONSEN, PRINCIPAL/SUPERINTENDENT: The vision of the school is to be like a family. I think the people here truly take on the thought that it takes a village to raise the kids that we have and they work well together as a group.