

Q and A

How is excellence measured at SLES?

Interesting question. Regardless of which direction this answer takes, an honest answer would “over time.” Proverbs states, “Raise a child in the manner in which...” Excellence is measured ultimately by the fulfillment of our mission. We also understand however, that we need to utilize short term measures. It is often said that what gets measured gets done.

Many of us measure academic excellence by grades; as a parent and an educator, I understand this. What do grades really measure? At some levels, effort accounts for more, while at others mastery does.

A grade on a spelling or multiplication test helps us determine if our child has learned to multiply a specific table or spell specific words. Even a 100% does not imply they have learned to apply what they have learned. Some dislike math word problems as they know how to get answers but are challenged with the application of formulas. Some can spell, but cannot comprehend what they read. Education is a process that rarely produces instant knowledge or mastery. Application and implementation over time is what is critical. Any given grade level alone does not paint the entire picture, but when the process is looked at vertically and a program is designed to build upon the different components, learning, growth and mission accomplishment are the results.

With so much change, I am concerned SLES will lose the purpose for which it was established. Will the school and board maintain its focus?

Our mission was established in 1961 by St Luke's Episcopal Church. Our mission statement was written in 2002 by a group of committed individuals. Our core values will remain the same and we remain committed to our mission. A lot of things are negotiable, and some things change, ranging from pedagogy in classroom instruction to the establishment of a new campus. Our mission and core values, however, are not negotiable and cannot and will not change. Please take time to read our mission statement and our philosophy in the Handbook. We expect to be held accountable from all constituents: parents, the Board of Trustees, the Church, our students, our alumni and each other.

If I send my child through 14-15 years at SLES can you guarantee me he/she will get in the best colleges and be successful when she graduates?

No. First, in the opinion of the school, there is no single best college. Just as you selected SLES because it meets your needs better than another educational alternative, the college process is not much different. There are academic, financial, geographical and cultural considerations. We can guarantee you that we will provide the opportunity for your student to acquire the tools to build a foundation of college readiness. SLES will strive to educate students and parents preparing for the next level of the life-long learning process. Expect to hear from Ellen Blackwell, our college advisor, and division heads about opportunities to learn more about preparing for the college adventure ahead. One note that one should always keep in mind... Few students who are not academically successful in college fail because of a lack of academic preparation. They fail because of a lack of life preparation. They fail because they did not learn the value of hard work, discipline, organization and being a part of something bigger than one's self. While academic and standardized test scores are essential components of the college preparatory experience that begins in the youngest grades at SLES, they are only pieces of the college/life preparatory puzzle.

When will I receive my child's schedule? Why can't I request a certain teacher for my child and have that request honored?

In our Early Childhood and Lower School divisions, the name of your child's teacher is sent home the first week in August. The timing and class composition is based upon making sure as many new students as possible are in the mix when final class rosters are determined. There are a number of factors that are considered when placement takes place, including gender, special needs and teacher recommendations. To publish this list too soon would cause frustration, as rosters are changing each time a new student is admitted.

In the middle and upper schools, schedules will be mailed in the upcoming days. We have been working to make sure there are as few conflicts as possible. In the Middle and Upper School, there is an element of choice in some of the courses that are taken, so that much effort must go into scheduling. There are also placement issues regarding AP courses and other courses. One example is math, which requires conferences during the summer with students and parents. Adding an additional grade each year also presents a unique set of challenges; thus far however, things are scheduling in remarkable ways.

My child's standardized test scores confuse me. Can the school help me understand more about this? Why do we spend so much time taking so many tests?

Yes, we will help you understand ACT, SAT, SAT10, SEASAT, PSAT, PLAN, AP, EXPLORE and other standardized measures we employ. These are all standardized national tests we currently use or plan to use. We are also looking at adopting CTP, or ERB instead of SAT10. If it sounds like a lot, it is, and we will help you get through it. There will be workshops this year to help all understand the testing process. These workshops should never take the place of the invitation to meet with teachers, counselors or administration to help you understand any type of evaluation process at our school. Regarding the number of tests, we test to be able to measure ourselves and our programs, year-to-year and over periods of time. While we are concerned about how we compare to other institutions, that is not our primary purpose. There are times when a school's funding depends on the results of particular tests. SLES does not "teach to the test." We teach our programs to meet our goals. Our primary goal as a college prep institution relative to test scores is to assist students and families to prepare for the college entrance test, the ACT and SAT and to help with admission to the school that best matches a family's academic and financial considerations.

Why are my children's scores average while they are making A's or B's in their classes?

This is a common question with no two answers likely to be the same. A test is a snapshot that shows performance only on a specific day, on specific tested content. As mentioned earlier, depending on the grade level, and the evaluation and reporting systems, grades and standardized tests may not directly correlate. There are also many students who do not test well in the standardized format. Our role over time for them is to develop these skills, as eventually the SAT and ACT will take on tremendous importance in upper school years.

Please contact the teacher or division administrator if you have questions or concerns, as there may be some specific recommendation that could help all understand better.

What are academic accommodations? If we are a college prep school, should we offer them?**What is psycho-educational testing Who should consider having their child tested?**

As stated in our Handbook, "St. Luke's provides specific classroom and testing accommodations for students with appropriate documentation on file regarding learning issues. These accommodations often, but not always, reflect similar ones offered at the college level." We offer select accommodations because it is the right thing for a college preparatory school to do.

Students who have documented learning differences may access certain test-taking accommodations in accordance with our college preparatory program, as outlined in our handbook. Instructional accommodations are very limited, as are college instructional accommodations. School accommodations are granted as the result of an extensive battery of tests provided by a certified and school-approved licensed psychologist or psychometrist. If you or your teacher observe that your child has a distinctive difference in learning, it may be wise to seek out counsel of the administration or counselor, and discuss the possibility of psycho-educational testing.

Why so much fundraising?

A very common question with a fairly simple answer. If we charge what it takes to educate each child through tuition we are confident a significant number of our families could not afford to attend SLES. Fundraisers are an attempt to supplement our revenue supporting special projects outside of tuition on occasion, but most often raised funds directly support operational budget items. Please look for more information from Jeanne Hammons regarding fundraising calendars and ways you can be involved.

Is it true the school is no longer participating in the SCRIP program?

Yes, it is true. At this time, the program does not offer enough benefits to our school. It is not cost-effective and the school believes funds could be better raised, and energy from parent spent in more productive ways. If you would like to know more about why the program has been suspended, please contact Jeanne Hammons in the advancement office.

Sometimes I have issues, and do not know who to contact concerning them.

Depending on the nature of a question, most can be resolved with the most important "go to" resource we have at our school, our academic faculty and coaching staff. If you feel you need administrative support, or have questions not best directed to faculty, our four division directors are your best line of communication. They will know what is happening in their division. Through our counseling staff and other support personnel we are confident any communication needs can be met, or gaps closed. A general organizational chart that will help direct you will be provided closer to the start of school.

If I need to contact the business office, what is the best way?

Our business office will be sending out specific guidelines and communication details, but a general overview may help. We will be moving some personnel this year from traditional roles and responsibilities to best meet the needs of our constituents. We have more space on the University Campus and it is important that business operations be in a common area. Julie Pinnix, our Director of Finance and Business Operations, is working hard to coordinate the most effective organizational structure. Look for specific information from the business office about billing and other very important information soon.

Is SLES an accredited school?

Yes, SLES has dual accreditation from SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) and SAIS (Southern Association of Independent Schools.) We are in the process of continued improvement. We submitted our two-year internal review this past May and are due another accreditation visit in Spring of 2013. Our Upper School is currently accredited. If we stay true to our mission and continue to improve, we see no reason why our hard work will not result in re-certification in 2013. We gather data each year as part of our improvement process and look forward to sharing all the good things the Lord is accomplishing with our accreditation bodies.

Are all teachers certified?

All faculty and staff meet SAIS/SACS accreditation credentials. As an accredited institution, SLES meets or exceeds all criteria as outlined by our accreditation governing bodies. Regarding certification, SLES has attracted teachers from a variety of geographical areas. These teachers are often able to enter reciprocal agreements regarding a teaching certificate, but for those who come from states who do not have reciprocity with Alabama, we do not require them to return to school to acquire an Alabama certificate. We also have teachers whose certification may have lapsed, but in accordance with all SAIS/SACS standards, all educators must be involved in significant continuing educational activities. There are times when we may want to hire a physician or engineer who may not have a teaching certificate but meets SAIS/SACS and SLES criteria, loves children, is credentialed and passionate about their content area and knows how to communicate and teach with passion and enthusiasm. One quality of independent schools is the ability to look at an overall need and how a person meets this need without being limited to an element like a particular certification as a litmus test. Certification is important but is not the specific answer to the best teacher in a classroom.

How is enrollment coming along?

Enrollment is healthy. Opening of additional sections on Japonica for the past few years supports the fact that enrollment is healthy as well as the addition of a tenth grade. The next question is, how large are we going to get? We want to reach full enrollment as soon as possible so we can stabilize program and tuition expectations and be able to forecast years in advance. Once full enrollment is achieved, we should have about 1,000 students, 500 on Japonica and 500 on University. We plan to have 70-75 students per grade 6-12 and have a plan at Japonica to accommodate this goal. This allows us to maintain a small school feel, while being large enough to offer the programs we expect in a college preparatory environment.

This is our first installment of Q and A. Look for more questions and answers in the future. As noted in the letter from the Headmaster, please do not allow a Q and A email question to replace a meeting or phone call with anyone at the school. Please send questions to qanda@stlukesmobile.com. Only questions with names will receive a response. Thank you very much for your support.

GO WILDCATS!