

Protestant Reformed Annual Society Meeting Secretary's Report

May 13, 2024

Good evening, and welcome to the annual meeting of the Society for Protestant Reformed Special Education. After 40 years of careful, diligent, and Christ-centered education for our children with special needs, we are happy to report to you that our Special Education program is stable and thriving. Many of our Board meetings this year began with reading a chapter from the book of Revelation. This reminded us to do our work with much prayer, watching, preparing, and being ready for the coming of our Lord and Savior. Rev. 14:1 stood out to me: "And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads." The Lamb's Father's name, written in our foreheads and in the foreheads of our children! And – no different from us – in the foreheads of our children with special needs. Thanks be to our Father who has blessed us so richly with these children!

We are overjoyed to see more of our children with special needs given a place in and served very well through our schools, and we are thankful to continue to share in the privilege of providing resources to various rooms in schools around the country. Also, as students with special needs are integrated into the general education classrooms as much as possible, our general education students are taught how to act, how to help, and how to learn from the children with special needs. They are taught to view these children not as outsiders or as "less than," but as brothers and sisters, fellow lambs that have our Father's Name written in their foreheads. Oh, how these children lead us closer to our Father!

We would be remiss if we did not speak often to **acknowledge our excellent staff of teachers and para-pros** at Heritage Christian School and Covenant Christian High School. First, our two teachers are Ms. Amanda Haney at Covenant and Mrs. Carli Engelsma at Heritage. Both are capable leaders and stable foundations for the programs. We celebrate a milestone teaching year for Amanda as she completes 25 years in Christian education, including just over a decade in our Special Education program. Carli served four years as a para-pro at Heritage and is now finishing her second year as teacher. We are extremely grateful to Carli for her willingness to step up and serve in the teacher role at Heritage for the past two years while we did not have a degree-holding teacher. Thank you, Amanda and Carli! When you see these ladies, please thank them for faithfully leading these classrooms for another year.

At the beginning of this school year, our program had eleven para-pros, eight at Heritage and three at Covenant. At Heritage, Aly DeBoer and Dora Koole are in their first year, and they both jumped right into the work, are fitting in, and are doing very well. Alex Brower and Kara Gritters are in their second year, Fi Holstege and Sherry Pipe their third year, Kamryn Jessup her fourth year, and Rhonda VanBemmel her fifth year. At Covenant, Nikki Holstege is finishing her third year, and Stephanie Adams, who also has an Occupational Therapy degree, is finishing her seventh year. We are very thankful that all plan to return next year. Kara Dykstra, who was in her fifth year, left us after the first semester to take up her high calling as a mother in the home as she and Carter were blessed with a beautiful daughter in February.

We are delighted to report that one of our para-pros, Miss Alexzandria (Alex) Brower, graduated last month from Western Governors University with a bachelor's degree in Special Education and Elementary Education. Alex recently accepted our offer to be the new Special Education teacher and program administrator at Heritage starting this fall, Lord willing. We also are thankful that Carli was willing to shift

into a different role at Heritage as Para-Pro Plus and Teacher Consultant in which she can assist with Alex's beginning as teacher and resume her previous duties of working individually with students.

Throughout these programs, our teachers and para-pros exhibit a heartfelt care and compassion for each of our special needs covenant youth. We recently **requested feedback on our program and staff** from the parents and the general education teachers. The responses were all positive, including: *"I'm very grateful for this team of gals," "expectations have been met and exceeded...she [staff member] can see what she should do and do it before even being asked...I feel so blessed to have Special Education students in my classroom and count it a joy to work with Special Ed to raise these little ones in the fear of the Lord."* And referring to a student with special needs: *"he has been an amazing blessing to me and his classmates. Having the Special Ed students in the classroom as much as they are able is a beneficial thing to everyone involved...the special education staff have been doing a fabulous job of accommodating and assisting ...communication with them is easy and constant...the only feedback I have is that the [para-pros] are doing a great job, and I would like to encourage them to keep up the great work!"* Thanks be to God for these faithful and loving educators, who continue to develop and execute curricula that are tailored to suit each of the children's specific needs.

The Society for PRSE administers and funds 100% of the Special Education programs at Heritage and Covenant. This year we have 13 students at Heritage and 9 at Covenant. Running these programs is the primary work of the Society, and the costs to do this make up about 2/3 of our annual budget.

For other schools, while we do not have oversight of these programs, the society contributes toward 50% of Special Education budgets and 15% of Discovery/Resource program budgets. The Society for PRSE supports in whole or in part Special Education Programs and/or Resource/Discovery Rooms in a total of eleven (11) locations in West Michigan, Randolph Wisconsin, Dyer Indiana, Northwest Iowa, and Loveland Colorado. We thank God for your support of these important causes in our Lord's kingdom.

Some activities to report on from this year:

We had the privilege of hosting the Board/Staff dinner in early October at the Old Wooden Barn in Hudsonville, where we enjoyed a beautiful evening with great food and fellowship to promote good relationships and camaraderie within the program.

We are happy to report that the annual support drive concluded very well this year! As of May 1, we collected nearly \$418,000, which is about \$33,000 *more* than our \$385,000 drive goal. Thanks to all of you for your generous giving, and thanks to our heavenly Father for providing through another year.

You may have seen that we recently updated and modernized our website. Special thanks to Amanda Haney, Courtney Jessup, and several Board representatives for their work with this. The new website has much more useful information for teachers, parents, and supporters, and can be updated easily by teachers and Board members.

Under the capable guidance of the **Building/Transportation Committee**, we partially funded the addition of sidewalks and also facilitated construction of a buddy-ball basketball system in the Heritage playground. The committee proactively engaged parents to help determine goals and priorities for building and site improvements. One result of that engagement is that we developed transportation options for our students so they can participate in class trips and other class activities. We also are actively working on improved safety and security measures. Lastly, the committee is developing a

prioritized list of building and playground projects to improve learning and recreation opportunities for our students; this will guide budgeting and spending plans for years to come. A special thanks to the Building Committee for really putting plans into action and getting a lot done this year!

With healthy fund balances, our **Finance Committee** researched other options, including other banks, to get better interest rates. Ultimately the decision was made to switch banking partners from Huntington Bank to West Michigan Community Bank. We recognized immediate benefits and have now additional funds to do more projects in our programs. This committee also diligently oversees and carefully manages the day-to-day financial transactions needed to run our program.

The **Education Committee** this year spent time and effort to complete updates to our Child Protection Policy. Our policies primarily reflect the policy of the host school (Heritage or Covenant), both of which also recently made significant updates to their policies. We also made substantial improvements to modernize and format the Board Handbook, which guides the day-to-day operations of the program. A couple area schools are investigating starting Special Education programs, and we are helping them work through the considerations and logistics. We have received many written reports from other Special Education programs around the country; we are thankful for those updates and appreciative of the insight we can gain from other faithful teachers.

All board members have the privilege of visiting the Heritage and Covenant Special Ed classrooms at least once each year. It is such a blessing to see the teachers and para-pros in action, to get direct feedback from them, and to see the students getting one-on-one attention and also interacting daily with the general education students. Education Committee representatives also had the privilege of meeting with Heritage and Covenant Education Committees to review all aspects of our programs as they exist in those host schools. Thanks to Heritage and Covenant for supporting us and allowing our programs to operate and thrive under their roofs!

For the board, this year marks the end of three years of faithful service for Doug Feenstra and Brandon Kaptein. Doug has served as Vice-All, Chairman of the Education Committee, and spent a year on the technology committee. Brandon has served as Treasurer and Chairman of our Finance, Publicity, and Fundraiser Committees. Personally, and on behalf of the Board, I extend heartfelt thanks to you men for your selfless labor. It has been an honor and a joy to work with Doug and Brandon, and by their Christian conduct and diligent efforts, to see their deep care and concern for this program.

A couple weeks ago, we were blessed to hear an excellent speech by Prof. Kuiper about children with autism in our churches and schools. And looking ahead, we eagerly await the next Peer-to-Peer walk scheduled for Saturday, September 28, at Covenant Christian High School. Watch for more details!

Lastly, we ask for your prayers and your time. We ask you to consider joining the Society if you are not yet a member. Talk to your friends, to your sons, about joining – not only if you have a child with special needs but out of a love and concern for all members of the body of Christ. By joining the Society, you can express with action your care for these children of Christ's church. Our Society theme is Psalm 139:14a, "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." We pray that you will share with us, both with your gifts and time, the joy of the efforts of PR Special Education, for the glory of His Name!

Respectfully submitted,

Kevin Gritters, Secretary