



Villa Marie Home and School for Exceptional Children Annual Report 2023 - 2024

CAO: Msgr. John Perkinton

Principal: Sr. Jeanette Rerucha

Mission Statement:

The mission of Villa Marie Home and School for Exceptional Children is to form the students spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, socially, and physically in partnership with the parents and in harmony with the specific gifts given by God to each student. In order to fulfill this mission, Villa Marie is committed to integrating the Catholic Faith with the best educational practices for qualifying children in need of special education services.

What is unique about Villa Marie?

Villa Marie Home and School for Exceptional Children is the only facility of its kind in this region. We provide a Catholic education to students with special needs, including autism, Down Syndrome, mild to moderate mentally handicapping conditions, developmental disabilities, and other health impairments that impede learning. Each of our students has a current IEP. Our enrollment is anywhere from 15 – 24 students; therefore, we are able to provide individualized and small-group instruction according to each student's IEP goals and objectives. What makes us really unique is that we are also a boarding school, so students from outside of Lincoln and its surrounding area are able to attend Villa Marie. However, many students from Lincoln also board during the week. Our boarding program provides the structure, routine, and consistency that are so essential for students with special needs; in addition, boarding helps us to create a family atmosphere. In this environment, our students form lasting friendships with each other. Villa Marie was founded by the late Msgr. James Dawson in 1964 and has been staffed by the Marian Sisters of the Diocese of Lincoln since the beginning.

New during the 2023 – 2024 School Year:

- Mrs. Jessica Kluck started working three days a week as a teacher in Sr. Jeanette's classroom, so that Sr. Jeanette can focus on principal duties.
- Miss Laura Martin was hired as a part-time para to help in Mrs. Faith's classroom.
- Mr. Grant Jochum was hired as an additional after-school helper.
- Sr. Barbara joined us as a volunteer two days a week, helping in the classrooms, helping Trudy serve lunch and clean up afterwards, and doing lots of miscellaneous jobs.
- We welcomed 3 new students in August.
- We were able to have a Licensed Mental Health Practitioner, Jennifer Schrage, on site once again for 15 hours per week during the 2023 – 2024 school year.
- Sheryl Jedlicka, a retired SLP, came as a volunteer to provide speech services for two of our students.
- We started doing Literature Groups this year. Students are grouped according to their reading level. Each group reads a classic book during a two-week rotation, and are assessed by doing projects and Blookets. When not in their literature group, students work on reading in the other classrooms.

- New locks were put on all the basement doors, including the classroom doors, as part of our safety and security plan.
- A new phone system was installed.
- We implemented 1:00 dismissals on the last Friday of the month so that the teachers could have some extra plan time.

Students, Staff, and Academics:

- Villa Marie had 19 students enrolled during the 2023-2024 school year. Ten of them were Catholic.
- Ten of our 19 students were boarders.
- Our students came from Lincoln, Beatrice, Omaha, and Bellevue.
- Villa Marie is ungraded. Our students ranged in age from 9 – 18.
- Our 2023 – 2024 staff consisted of a Chief Administrative Officer, a principal, 2 full-time teachers (both certified in special education,) 2 part-time teachers (both certified in special education) 2 full-time paras, 2 part-time paras, school counselor, office manager, office assistant, food-service manager, housemother, 3 after-school helpers, chief maintenance officer, and a development director.
- Numerous volunteers helped us in many ways during the school year by working in the classrooms and library, cleaning, organizing, and doing lots of miscellaneous jobs.
- We have 2 therapy cats, Ice Cream and Butterscotch. Chief, an emotional support dog, came to school every day with our para Maria.
- The curriculum at Villa Marie is guided by each student's IEP (Individualized Education Plan.)
- Daily Mass is celebrated at Villa Marie. Approximately 20 priests rotate in celebrating Mass for us.
- Daily religious instruction is provided by the Sisters to all students, both Catholic and non-Catholic.
- Villa Marie students have daily classes in Reading, Writing, Spelling, and Math which are tailored to their individual needs and IEP goals, as well as daily Religion and P.E. classes. Students also take Science, Social Studies, Art, and Music classes, and those 14 and older are enrolled in a Transition Class. Cooking, Sewing, and Computer classes are also offered, as well as daily job time and opportunities to learn and practice social skills.
- Villa Marie partners with Voc Rehab to help our students ages 14 and over prepare to transition to the work force. Blaine Harvey came once a month to meet with our students in Transition Class, assisting them in learning job skills and preparing for the future.

Student Performance:

Each student at Villa Marie has an IEP, which is reviewed and revised annually. Student progress is evaluated by assessments conducted by the classroom teachers in reading, spelling, writing, and math, according to each child's ability level. Students generally make significant progress in all areas, due in a large part to the individualized instruction that Villa Marie is able to provide.

Events during 2023 – 2024:

- Villa Marie was voted a “Superstar Catholic School” in a contest sponsored by Spirit Catholic Radio. We were presented a banner, trophy, and \$1,000 worth of air time.
- The students who are members of our Villa Marie Eagles 4-H club did very well on the projects that they took to the Lancaster County Fair during the summer. Msgr. Perkinton assisted by teaching woodworking to about 8 of the students. They made wooden boxes and bird houses. Mariann Kozisek was our sewing teacher. Mrs. Deb Faith is the leader of our club, which is in its third year.
- The Villa Marie Eagles 4-H members attended the annual 4-H Awards Night. Each of them received a pin and a certificate for their membership. Mrs. Faith also received an award for being our leader.
- Field trips are an integral part of our educational philosophy at Villa Marie. These are some of the places we went:
 - Guardians of Freedom Air Show. We were VIP guests of Fr. Michael Zimmer.
 - State Fair
 - Vala’s Pumpkin Patch
 - Plum Creek Literacy Festival
 - Homestead National Park. The mother of two of our students is a park ranger there.
 - UNL Women’s Basketball game
 - Lincoln Stars Hockey game
 - SAC Aerospace Museum, which also had a DaVinci Machines exhibit.
 - Whispering Acres, a farm near Beatrice. Students toured their petting zoo and enjoyed horseback rides. Some of our students had worked here the previous summer as part of a Voc Rehab-sponsored work-based learning opportunity.
- We were able to attend a performance of “Drum Tao” at the Lied Center, made possible through a grant from the Nebraska Arts Council.
- The Nebraska Arts Council also sponsored two visiting artists:
 - Liz Shay-McCoy did a drawing unit with the students.
 - Catherine Witt did mosaics with the students.
- One student made his First Confession and began preparation for First Communion.
- We had our annual Non-traditional Thanksgiving Feast on November 21st. Each student prepared his or her favorite food for the feast.
- Villa Marie students participated in a Live Nativity, as part of the CHRISTmas at the Center festivities. This was one of the events held to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the Catholic Center.
- Our students did an outstanding job in their performance of our Christmas play, “The Royal Palace Invitation.” The play is an annual event. Sr. John’s School graciously allows us to use their gym and stage for the performance.
- Our annual Villa Marie Dance and Fundraiser, “Shine Like His Stars—60 years of Angels Among Us,” held on February 9th, 2024, was a tremendous success.
- Catholic Schools Week was celebrated at Villa Marie with lots of activities.
- Our students participated in the annual Pro-Life poster contest.
- Our Keys to Success Class did a project called “I Care.” They purchased suitcases and filled them with items for children going into foster care, then delivered them to Cedars Home for Children.
- We had our three-year Administrative Review by Nutrition Services.
- Our 5th annual Science Fair was held in the spring. All students in both basic and advanced science presented interesting and educational projects.

- We participated in an Embryology project and hatched baby chicks in the spring.
- The St. Michael's 8th graders came out to do Christmas and Easter parties for us.
- Students viewed the partial solar eclipse on April 8th.
- The Cornhusker Car Club brought several Model A cars and gave the students rides.
- By the grace of God, in April we were spared from a tornado that was headed our way. Fortunately, we had an early dismissal that day so the students had all gone home.
- Spirit Catholic Radio did their "Spirit Mornings" broadcast from Villa Marie in May. Several students, staff and volunteers were interviewed.
- Villa Marie participates in Bowling, Basketball, and Track as part of Special Olympics. All of our Special Olympics Bowlers qualified for the State Competition. Every member of our Track Team also qualified for State, and brought home many medals. In Basketball, our Villa Marie Eagles Team earned first place at the Regional Competition and won the gold medal once again at the State Competition.
- One student received his Certificate of Completion at our Graduation and Awards Ceremony on May 23rd, 2024. Every student received a unique award celebrating their accomplishments.
- Teacher Doris Dermann, Office Manager Dianne Kalita, and Office Assistant Sheila Linder all retired at the end of the school year.

Donors and Benefactors:

- The Knights of Columbus, our oldest and dearest friends, continued to provide for our students in so many ways:
 - Very generous financial donations. Many Councils sent the proceeds of their Tootsie Roll Drive to Villa Marie.
 - A Paper products drive, a picnic in the spring, and the day at Vala's Pumpkin Patch, all donated by the Gretna Knights of Columbus
 - New coats for the students provided by the St. John's Knights
 - Tour of Lights, a Mass for Special Needs Persons followed by a pizza party, and a cookout provided by the Cathedral Knights of Columbus.
 - A Mass for Special Needs Persons followed by a pizza party and Bingo with lots of prizes, sponsored by the Davey Knights of Columbus
 - Project Lori, spearheaded by Sammi Lowery, which generously provided many wonderful wish list items to our teachers for their classrooms.
- Thanks to the generosity of the Dillon Foundation, we were able to use a Dillon Grant to purchase 20 new iPads for the students, a new leather recliner for our calm-down area, 40 new folding chairs for the dining room, a cover for our pool table, and a leaf blower.
- Some of the students were recipients of new shoes through the Kicks for Kids Program sponsored by Sandhills Global. Jim Hansen brought the shoes out for the students.
- Jeanette Lupori, a Thirty-One Consultant, gave each student a zipper tote bag filled with gifts.
- Mary Frances continued to bless us frequently with cakes and other goodies, flowers, books for the library, educational materials for the classroom, sewing and craft projects, and other miscellaneous items. We are very grateful for her generosity.
- The Food Bank made deliveries to Villa Marie once a month. The food was distributed to our needy families.
- Parish "Asks" were conducted during weekend Masses at some of the parishes in Lincoln and the surrounding area. They were very well received, and people were very generous.