

Ross School, Morriss Center To Consolidate To teach tots to teens on two campuses next year

By Amanda Angel

The Ross School and the Morriss Center School, the largest and third-largest private schools on the South Fork, yesterday announced plans to "consolidate" into one prenursery-through-high school program, to be called the Ross School, by the 2006-7 academic year.

Officials reached an agreement in principle on Tuesday to create a new, not-for-profit private school that would combine the assets and curriculums of the two schools. Under this agreement, the Ross School, which now starts at fourth grade, would be divided into two campuses.

Fourth through 12th-grade classes would continue to be taught at the present Ross School campus at Goodfriend Park in East Hampton. Prenursery through third grade would be taught at the Morriss Center School's Hampton Day School Campus on Butter Lane in Bridgehampton, which would become the Ross School's Hampton Day School Campus.



Michele Claeys, head of the Ross middle school, said that officials had decided to keep the name "Ross School" because the new school "will continue with the Ross School's mission and philosophy."

According to Dick Malone, the Morriss Center head of school, the name "Morriss Center" will not be used in the new school.

Tentative plans for a separate Morriss Center high school within the Ross Upper School, which would have allowed a more flexible course of study, were not included in the agreement. Ms. Claeys said that 4th through 12th grades would maintain the current Ross School curriculum, which stresses global literacy and knowledge of world cultures.

Meanwhile, the Morriss Center curriculum for the lower grades will be incorporated into the new school.

Two members of the Morriss Center School's board of trustees, Janet Brinton, the executive chairwoman, and Barry Allardice, the treasurer, have been invited to sit on an 11 or 12-member

Ross School board, along with Nick Combemale, the chief financial officer of the Morriss Center.

Missing from that board will be Michael Recanati and Ira Statfeld, the chairman and vice chairman of the Morriss Center board. The two took control of the Hampton Day School in December 2002. They renamed it the Morriss Center, and built on a new high school program.

"Merging the two schools will best serve the needs of Morriss Center School students and offer an affordable independent educational alternative of the highest quality on the East End for generations to come," said Mr. Recanati.

Ross School officials intend to award some amount of financial aid to 50 percent of the student body. Tuition for the 2006-7 academic year is \$17,500 for students in kindergarten through third grade, \$19,500 for those in middle school, and \$21,500 in high school.

Chris Sarlo, the head of school at the Ross School, and Mr. Malone have been discussing a possible collaboration since the beginning of the academic year. Those plans became public when Courtney Ross, the Ross School's founder, announced them at an open house on Oct. 22.

At that time, Mr. Sarlo and Mr. Malone said they were both worried about the Morriss School's sustainability if the Ross School started offering kindergarten through third-grade classes. The schools had been largely silent about details surrounding a possible union since then for fear of disrupting negotiations.

The Ross School now has 346 students enrolled in 4th through 12th grade at its East Hampton campus. The Morriss Center has 162 enrolled in pre-nursery programs through high school at its Hampton Day School campus in Bridgehampton and at its high school in Wainscott.

Ms. Claeys said that there is space for every Morriss Center student at the Ross School next year. However, Morriss students will have to undergo a placement process, for which they have been asked to sign up by Jan. 20.

"There is always the possibility that the school and the family will decide that the school is not right for the student," Ms. Claeys said. She would not say if the Ross School would deny admission to any Morriss Center student.

There will be an open house at the Ross School next Thursday for parents of Morriss Center students.

Mr. Malone said that enrollment figures would dictate whether either school will fire teachers and other staff.

This week's announcement also kicked off a capital campaign for the Ross School through which it hopes to raise \$70 million. The school has already reached the halfway point, largely due to a pledge by Ms. Ross of a 152-acre parcel of land adjacent to the school. The land is worth \$25 million, according to a press release.

The land, which is mostly wooded property, is owned by Galapagos Hampton and Ronic Realty, both landholding corporations in which Ms. Ross is involved. Part of the land was slated for an eventual expansion of the Ross School, and at least part of it is being appraised by East Hampton Town, which hopes to buy it with money from the Community Preservation Fund.

Ms. Claeys said there are no immediate plans for a building expansion on the Ross School campus, but that the land donation will allow the school to grow in the future.

"I am delighted that this consolidation is a win-win outcome for both schools, and for the long-term future of the independent schools on the East End," Ms. Ross said in a press release.

Ross and Morriss Center May Join Primary grades could use Butter Lane campus; high school would be at Ross

By Amanda Angel

Parents attending a meeting on Saturday to discuss the possibility of a kindergarten through third-grade program at the Ross School were surprised when school officials hinted at a "collaboration" between Ross and the Morriss Center School as soon as next September.

"I was blown away," said Georgia Curatola, the vice president of the parents association at Ross. All three of her children attended the Morriss Center School or its previous incarnation, the Hampton Day School, before they went on to the Ross School.



The Hampton Day School campus of the Morriss Center School might house kindergarten through third grade.

Morgan McGivern

"I have to say everyone I've spoken to is very positive. The only anxiety has come from parents who are afraid that their children will not get a spot in the classes."

In a statement sent by e-mail, Courtney Sale Ross, the school's founder, said, "The Ross School board of trustees holds the well-being of our students and parents first and foremost. As I have said in the past it is the board's responsibility to keep Ross on a path toward sustainability."

"We are in discussion currently with Morriss Center/Hampton Day - if these talks are fruitful and a win-win for students, parents, and sustainability, it would be wonderful for the entire community of the East End."

The discussions about a collaboration have been primarily between Chris Sarlo, the head of Ross, and Richard Malone, the head of the Morriss Center. The two men have been friendly for over two decades, starting when Mr. Sarlo was principal of East Hampton High School and Mr. Malone was principal of the Southampton Intermediate School during the 1980s.

"We met three or four times, only to talk about some general big issues as to how to meet the needs of the community, and our discussion jumped off the pages, so to speak," Mr. Sarlo said on Tuesday.

Mr. Sarlo said that the Ross School had just completed a three-year-long study that included an investigation into adding the primary school grades. Ross has traditionally begun instruction in fifth grade, since it received a state charter in 1993, until this year, when it added one 14-student section of fourth grade in September.

The school's leaders always had plans to expand down to kindergarten, said Michele Claeys, the

head of the Ross middle school. Recent interest from parents, especially those of current Ross students who have siblings entering primary grades, had pushed the administration to explore adding a kindergarten through third grade program, Ms. Claeys said. There is enough space on Ross's East Hampton campus to have one 14-student section of each grade, she said.

"If we did open the K-through-3 program, it could have a negative effect on the Morriss Center," Mr. Sarlo said.

Mr. Malone said that the new Ross School fourth-grade did cut into the Morriss Center enrollment for this year, and that he expected kindergarten through third-grade classes at Ross to have a similar effect. Meanwhile, down the road, the Ross School would not have space to expand the lower grades on its East Hampton campus without building onto the schools.

"We are limited if we start a primary school, but we could accommodate more kids with a collaboration with the Morriss Center's," Mr. Sarlo said.

The two men began talking about a possible collaboration on Oct. 19. "It really was an attempt to sustain the viability of both schools," Mr. Sarlo said.

"The whole idea in collaborating is why would you duplicate services when you could serve the community with a more enriched program?" Mr. Malone said.

Pooling the two schools' resources would create one larger, more stable school with better facilities, both men said. Although there are no set plans, one model being discussed would set a primary school at the Hampton Day School campus on Butter Lane in Bridgehampton, and the middle and high school grades at the Ross School. Ms. Claeys has already visited the Hampton Day School campus to investigate its primary school curriculum.

The Morriss Center high school in Wainscott would most likely be incorporated into the Ross high school as an alternative program of study to the Ross School's "spiral curriculum." It would serve students who need a flexible academic schedule in order to pursue interests outside the school setting, such as ballet training or equestrian show jumping. It would also become the only private high school on the South Fork.

One question that has come up in the discussions is how to maintain the distinct character of both schools should they be combined.

"The identity of the Morriss Center/Hampton Day School and the Morriss Center high school have to be preserved," Mr. Malone said on Tuesday.

Mr. Sarlo said he would be presenting plans of a collaboration to Ms. Ross tomorrow. A meeting between Mr. Sarlo, Mr. Malone, and representatives from both the Ross School and Morriss Center boards is scheduled for Wednesday. Janet Brinton, the executive chair of the Morriss Center's board of trustees, did not respond to messages left at her house yesterday morning.

"Our friendship has certainly contributed to the smoothness and speed of our talks," Mr. Sarlo said. "I know that we have to have a decision made probably within the next month."