

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

Ross School, Morriss Center to Consolidate to Teach Tots to Teens on Two Campuses Next Year

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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 pre-nursery-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. Pre-nursery 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.