



OFFICE OF THE HEADMASTER

Opening of School Remarks
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Celebrating with Pride

When I was growing up my home was not the site of frequent dinner parties. My parents were social and enjoyed getting together with friends, but our small home in a quiet neighborhood did not lend itself to large social gatherings. When my parents did entertain, it was usually a party for the choir of our church where my mother was the organist and choir director. On a few occasions, though, I remember my parents going all out. You see, they believed in the importance of living in relation to others, of creating opportunities for neighbors—new and old, close friends and passing acquaintances—to come together for fellowship. They believed those were the events that laid the foundation for borrowing a cup of sugar or an egg, and that led to conversations by the mailbox, and the delivery of casseroles when someone had a baby, or a family member was in the hospital. They worked to create the networks that made a neighborhood a community. And so, every few years, our house became ground zero for a neighborhood party. These were special events. My parents were always concerned that our house look presentable, which was no small feat with three active boys, but they went to special pains to make sure that when it was party time, we were looking our very best. My parents believed that the condition of our house was a reflection of their character, so when it was party time, it was time to spruce things up. In my memory, I think one such party prompted the re-upholstering of our living room sofa. Whether that was the sofa that was subsequently covered by the clear vinyl slipcover I can't recall—though thankfully, like many fads of the 60s and 70s, that one was short-lived.

Considered in the context of my childhood experience, this year for the Academy is a neighborhood party on steroids. We will entertain guests who have been on our campus on a regular basis for many years, and we will welcome people back to campus who have not been to South Byfield for decades. How we present ourselves to our guests will make a difference. We

need to be at our best all the time, to convey to our visitors, whether they are guests for the gala, visiting teams, parents coming for registration or parents' weekend, or alumni stopping by simply because the communications they have received about the 250th have sparked in them a desire to return to their old school, that we take pride in our work and in our roles as stewards of this institution. What they observe when they arrive will tell them something about who we are and what we value.

As you could not have failed to notice, even if you have been away all summer, life in Byfield has been anything but sleepy. We have made a significant investment in our physical plant in recent months. I am sure that by now you have seen our beautiful new servery and wonderfully renovated dining hall. Pierce has undergone a major renovation using our newly-adopted dormitory interior design standards, and Ingham has been given a significant facelift. We will continue this work in subsequent summers as we install a new sprinkler system in Eames next year and give it the kind of complete overhaul that Pierce received this year, and our academic buildings will begin to receive the attention that they need as well. All of the windows in our library, most of which had rotting sills and broken seals, have been replaced. A new staircase is being added to Phillips that will allow us to make use of the building's third floor for the first time in years, and we will bring the College Counseling office back to the administrative center of the campus, demonstrating to students, parents, and colleges alike the centrality of this office in our efforts to support students as they move on to life after Byfield. The staircase will also allow for more seamless transitions for our prospective families as they move directly from the Cobb Room to conversations with admissions officers on the second floor. These changes should convey the clear message that we care about providing our community with spaces for living, recreation, and study that are well-suited to enhancing the educational experience of our students, and the lives of all who live and work here. We want people who come onto our campus to know that we take pride in our work and are invested in our school.

All of you were invited last May to complete a survey administered by the firm that we brought in to conduct a marketing and branding study for the school. Some of you also participated in focus groups with these individuals. The response rate to the survey was excellent from all constituencies, and much of what we learned was encouraging—even heartwarming. We now have data from surveys and focus groups that reinforce much of what I think we have all long believed to be true about our school: that we are a place that cherishes close ties between students and faculty members; that one of our strong suits is nurturing the talents of individual students and stretching them to grow by encouraging them to try new things; that we provide a rigorous academic experience in an environment that does not beat creativity and a love for learning out of our students. As we head into the celebration of our 250th anniversary, we can and should take pride in our school and the roles that each of us play in making this community so special. Just as this year of celebration provides us with an opportunity to reflect on what we are doing well, it also calls on us to ponder how we can demonstrate a commitment to excellence in all that we do.

The same study that reinforced these strengths of our community also highlighted some specific areas where we can improve. Too many people (students, faculty, parents, and staff) commented that our buildings look tired, that the quality of our residence halls needs attention, and that our campus looks and feels “shabby.” Now, I want to be clear from the start where I believe the responsibility for this problem does, and does not, lie. Most importantly, the responsibility does not lie with our colleagues in the buildings and grounds department who work so hard year in and year out to keep our campus running smoothly. They have done everything we have asked of them with great skill and professionalism and I applaud them for their commitment to our school. The issue before us is not one of effort; it is a matter of deferred maintenance. Problems of deferred maintenance have almost nothing to do with the day-to-day efforts of those who work to maintain our facilities and have everything to do with institutional planning and community attitudes. It is on these fronts that I think we as a community need to focus.

I suspect we have all been guilty at various times of overlooking a cabinet that needs repair, or a mess left in the corner of a building, or a broken piece of furniture, or a leaky faucet. Taken separately, each of these things is an eye-sore or a minor annoyance. In the course of our busy days it doesn’t seem worth the effort to draw attention to the issue, or take steps to resolve it ourselves. I confess to being as guilty of this as anyone. The problem, of course, is that we can’t take these things separately; we have to look at them collectively because this is how others see and experience our campus. And taken together they add up to a lack of attention to detail, a sense that we really don’t have very high expectations for ourselves, a sentiment that I have heard some of you describe as “good enough for Govs.” This, I think, is where we have let ourselves down. I would like to suggest to you that there is no room for this sentiment in our community. We are simply too good for that. We have more pride in our school than that. And our students and their families deserve better than that. Good enough is rarely very good at all, and we have every reason to hold ourselves to the highest possible standards.

All of the improvements to our campus that I mentioned earlier required an investment of financial resources; we had to allocate the funds necessary to make these improvements. But there are things that each of us can do to enhance the quality of our surroundings that require nothing more than a commitment to being at our best, a commitment to countering the culture of “good enough.” If you see something on campus that does not meet the expectations that you would have for your own property, put in a work order. If you see students spitting gum out onto the sidewalk or tossing peels into the bushes, remind them that we have more self-respect than that and they need to do their part to keep our campus looking sharp. If you see trash alongside a pathway, pick it up. And if you see students who are out of dress code, speak to them about it or let the dean’s office know. As Perry Nelson reminded us at the start of last academic year, we are a community of learners, and how we look reflects the value we place on the educational enterprise. Our dress code is designed to demonstrate our respect for academics and each of us

has a responsibility for reminding students to live up to those expectations. From our landscaping, to the condition of our buildings, to the impressions we convey by our dress, how we look as we welcome people to our campus matters—not just next year, but every year. It is the difference between being proud of who we are and settling for looking shabby.

You will surely recognize other changes in the community in the coming days as well. We will have a reception in the library tomorrow afternoon to view the progress on the 250th anniversary mural. The second floor of the library has been remodeled to create space for a center for teaching and learning. We have devoted new staffing resources to this important work and Elaine White will explain our vision for that center and details about how it will function later in the day. We have also expanded our affective education curriculum by devoting a full semester to our sophomore health and wellness course and offering two electives for juniors and seniors. As I mentioned earlier, once the new Phillips stairway is complete the college counseling office will be able to move from Boyton back to Phillips. Hugh McGraw announced in an email to the community yesterday that the business and human resources offices have been consolidated in newly renovated space in Commons, and the space in the back of the Chapel will revert to its former use as a classroom. By any measure, there's a lot happening on our campus and many reasons to be excited about the year ahead.

We have an opportunity at this juncture in the life of our school to accelerate; to take advantage of our year of celebration and use the energy and excitement and attention that come our way to take our school to the next level of excellence. To sit back and revel in the celebration itself without thinking about what comes next would be to miss a marvelous opportunity. Instead, we must use the celebration to ensure that when we enter our 251st year, we are a stronger community, a healthier community, a more inclusive community, and a community that conveys to all who come to this campus that we take pride in the work that we do to turn boys and girls into young men and women of character.

Our traditions are rich. Our history is vibrant. Our past is one in which we can and should take great pride. And in our past we find the creativity and resilience that will make our school strong and healthy for generations to come.

Do we deserve to celebrate this year? Absolutely. Are our best years behind us? Not on your life. So as we celebrate let us simultaneously rededicate ourselves to the principles that have served our school so well for so long: putting children first, striving for excellence, and challenging each other to be the best we can be. If we can focus ourselves on these principles in the coming year, I have no doubt that our 251st year will be the most exciting year in the history of the Academy, and we will have a lot of fun along the way.