

# Family Weekend Address

by  
Head of School Alixe Callen

*Friday, Sept. 28, 2018*

Before I begin, I want to take this opportunity to thank our amazing school prefects – Molly McCormick, Zane Cowans, Colin McGillivray, Peyton Mulhern, and Jackson Rockett – for all they have done to build school spirit and promote a positive school community this fall. From organizing Tucks and Slip N' Slide parties and talent shows to their leadership of assembly to their inclusion of everybody in all events, they have done so much to cultivate a kind, inclusive, enthusiastic spirit here at SG. And, in fact, while I am at it, I want to extend that thanks to the entire senior class. You have all stepped up in such a wonderful way. From leading the Sachuest and Sakonnet rivalry, to rethinking our Honor Board processes, to connecting with our younger students, to cooking burgers, to simply showing up for every event possible, you have been incredible. Thank you all for everything you have done to nurture such a wonderful community here on the Hilltop. I have no doubt that this senior class will leave quite a legacy. I am so grateful and humbled to be able to partner with them.

As you all know, I have just started my second year as head of school at St. George's. And as you also likely know, since I talked about it ad nauseum, I purposely chose to spend last year watching, listening, and learning. It was such a luxury to have that time, to inherit a school that was already in strong shape. Not all new heads are so lucky. Having that space and time to get to know the school was truly a privilege. Despite the fact that I was asked at least 27,000 times over the course of the year about my vision for St. George's, I did my best to watch, to hold my tongue, to check my thinking, to really listen to faculty, staff, parents, alums, and, most significantly, to students. And then over the summer, I started testing out some ideas, sharing my thoughts with the leadership team, faculty, student leaders, and the board.

Tonight, I'd like to share some of these ideas publicly for the first time. I do this with some trepidation. These are still very much in draft form. I am truly testing things out. So, I am going to give you a glimpse into my current thinking. In return, I'd love to ask for your feedback. If something that I say tonight resonates, or doesn't resonate, I hope you will reach out. Or if you think I'm missing something, let me know. Input is encouraged.

So, without further ado... There are five big themes that I'm thinking about. In the interest of alliteration, let's call them the 5 C's - community, classrooms, conversation, campus, and more community.

So, theme 1. As you have all heard me say, perhaps ten times too many, our theme for this year is community. I believe that the most important work we can do here at St. George's is

to cultivate a thriving, diverse, enthusiastic, kind, inclusive, spirited community. In this world where people are more connected to their phones than to their neighbors, we need to be a place of engagement, a place where students learn how to interact in real life. I want our community to be one characterized by common purpose, mutual respect, pride and joy. As a boarding school, our ability to achieve this kind of vision far exceeds that of our day school peers. We can literally do this 24/7 – help students to understand how to live, work and thrive together every day. To my mind, the best way to do that is to invite students to be fully engaged members of the community. We have done a significant amount of work this summer and fall to streamline our expectations of students, to provide them with genuine trust and respect. From our move away from picayune rules, to our focus on positive relationships, we are trying to create a community where mutual respect and trust are at the center. If we control students' every movement, they will never learn to be fully engaged community members. Some people might see this goal as loosey-goosey, fuzzy-wuzzy, unicorns and rainbows, I think is among the most important work that we do. We know from all sorts of research that the best way to prepare students for life after high school is to give them opportunities to authentically collaborate and interact with people different from themselves, to entrust them to make real decisions, to give them real and genuine opportunities to practice being adults. We also know that colleges and universities are explicitly looking for students who will contribute to their communities. Our intention to create a thriving, kind, diverse community is far from extraneous, it is central and critical to our work.

Theme 2. Classrooms. One of the things that I've noticed about independent schools is that we are all engaged in a crazy arms race, not only to build more buildings (I'll say more about that in a moment), but also to start more programs – more special institutes and workshops and trips. Now, I want us to be innovative and interesting, experiential and bold – but I think this starts in our classrooms, our art studios, on our fields, and in our Chapel. I want us to be known as the prep school with the very best teaching, for the curriculum that's the most inspiring. I want us to blow our students' minds every day, to inspire them to excellence in all ways imaginable. Yes, there should be experiential opportunities and innovative instruction, but I want that to be part of what we do every day, not some special add-on that you sign up for. Like our global studies course or Geronimo, we should embed these special programs and efforts into our regular curriculum, using our classrooms as the launching points for exploration and excellence. I will add that we are perfectly suited for this. After spending time watching our teachers teach last year, I can say, without a doubt, that our faculty is second to none. Our ongoing work is to make sure they have the time, the resources, and the support to continue to inspire excellence.

The third theme is related to the last. To stick with the whole alliteration thing (the third c), I'm calling it conversation. I want us to be leaders in the world of education, to be real participants in the national conversation about what high school might be. There is so much amazing work happening on this Hilltop, I want us to share it, both to really put our school on the map, but also so that we might help other schools and teachers. By no means am I suggesting that we have all of the answers. However, we are interested in actively asking questions, sharing our thoughts, making our practice visible and transparent to the outside world. We are already seeing this in action. Just this week, Justin Cerenzia made a

guest appearance on a widely known podcast called Teach Better, and Caitie Cotton published a blog piece on a website devoted to teaching US History. And there is more of that to come. The world needs to know what is happening on this Hilltop, and we are committed to lowering the fences, to being transparent, to showing people just how much great thinking is happening here. And I hope that by doing so, this small school can have a big impact – can help to improve education for students everywhere.

The fourth theme – our campus. Without a doubt, we have the most stunning campus on earth. I hear our alumni say all of the time that this is the most beautiful place they have ever lived. Whether it be our gorgeous view, or our lovely old buildings, there is a beauty about this place that inspires us all. We need to steward that, care for it, make sure these buildings are here for generations to come. As I suggested earlier, I am not interested in entering some sort of arms race where we attempt to modernize everything, losing all of our historic charm in the process. There are buildings on our campus that need some work. And as such, we have some projects on the horizon – our goal in that work, however, is to do our best to restore and preserve our beautiful old buildings, as opposed to tearing everything down and starting anew. As a caveat, I will add that sometimes new is necessary and also beautiful. Our turf fields stand as a perfect example. Where possible, however, we will be about historical restoration.

And finally, our fifth theme – more community. (Really, there's no such thing as too much community.) Moving forward, I want us to nurture our extended St. George's family, to help our parents and alumni who live and work away from the Hilltop to feel part of what is happening here, to be knowledgeable about what we are trying to accomplish, to feel connected to me and to the rest of our faculty. To that end, we are committed to finding ways to know you, to sharing our practices with you, to getting out and seeing you in your communities, to engaging in real and thoughtful conversation about our work. I will add that just as we are encouraging our students to put down their devices and connect with each other, I hope we can do the same with our adult community. Technology can help us to stay connected, but it is no substitute for face-to-face interaction.

As I suggested at the start of this speech, people ask me often about my vision for St. George's. I want to be clear that this is not my vision. This vision comes from all of you, from every conversation I have had over the course of the past 15 months. So many people have extended themselves, shared their thoughts, and provided insight. There is remarkable agreement about what we might be – a strong and thriving community where we support and champion each other towards deep learning and personal excellence. I have spoken of this being a utopia, an example to the world of what is possible. And if we can make this happen, that is exactly what we will be – a utopia. There is no doubt in my mind that we can accomplish this, but, as I have said to the students repeatedly this fall, it will take every one of us to make it happen. A community cannot thrive without its members being engaged. I hope I can count on all of you to put down your phones, turn off your laptops and make this Hilltop sing with purpose, respect, pride, and joy.

Thank you.