



The Taft School

March 12, 2020

Dear Faculty, Staff, Students, and Parents:

I write to update you on the school's work around the COVID-19 pandemic and what we are doing to ensure the health and safety of the community. I begin with a statement, follow with some details, and close with some thoughts.

After extensive discussion with local health authorities, school physician Dr. Diane Fountas, and campus leaders, we have decided to postpone student return to campus from March break for at least three weeks (through April 13). Taft's academic dean, dean of faculty, and director of technology are working with faculty to create a strategy around remote learning with the goal of beginning this program on or around March 30. Put simply, for a period of time, we will begin a new Taft experience.

In some ways, this was as difficult a decision as I have made in my years as headmaster: after all, I believe that what happens on campus with passionate and committed adults and eager and bright students is inspiring. *Nothing* can replace what happens every day on this campus. Further, I see our obligation of an education to students and families as a profound one. So, to suspend our on campus classes and activities is *serious*. Ultimately, however, there is no question that this is the right thing to do given how complex, unstable, and dynamic the COVID-19 landscape is. The safety and health of all community members, especially the students under our care, matters most.

I fully recognize that this announcement brings complex logistical inconveniences and challenges for families on and off campus. But this news is not merely about an adjustment of schedule. For all community members, students especially, it is no doubt unsettling, sad, and upsetting—and most poignantly so for seniors. There is, after all, *loss*. And faculty and staff will feel similar emotions as we realize how profoundly our work and lives are changing. We, too, will be challenged. To everyone receiving this letter, I send my support and care, our commitment to supporting every member of the community, and the faith we will one day look back and believe we are an even stronger community.

Here is our way forward:

We all recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic is one with dynamic conditions, so you can anticipate future communications as we adjust to the changes. What is true and sensible today may not be tomorrow. We are building a webpage to centralize information and communication, and various offices on campus—for instance college counseling and academic affairs—will be communicating as well.

In academic department meetings *before* March Break, anticipating the possibility of postponement of school, faculty had already begun to consider what remote learning might look like, and this work will continue when faculty return. While nothing can replace the experience of a teacher and students in a classroom together—that experience simply cannot be

duplicated—we are confident that we will be able to provide a valuable ongoing remote education. The Taft faculty will work with the commitment, creativity and passion they always show. The educational experience will naturally vary by teacher, class, and department. I ask that we all enter into this with optimism and understanding.

It would be irresponsible to predict when normal school operations might resume. Our hope is that we will return on April 13, but that may or may not happen. We will monitor conditions daily, and we will give at least a one week advanced notice if any significant change is necessary.

Parents with questions, especially around accommodations and travel planning, should contact Assistant Headmaster Jeremy LaCasse (jlacasse@tafts.school.org).

There will no doubt be questions about events like Alumni Weekend and Commencement. I believe those are too far out for me to responsibly make any predictions. Our hope is that we will be able to hold these important events.

I close with some history and context, returning to our founder Horace Taft, on a day much like this, *almost exactly* a century ago. On March 18, 1920, Taft wrote his dear friend and headmaster Sherman Thacher:

...The winter term began badly, the influenza attacking us very soon after the beginning, and pretty soon the infirmary was chock full of influenza and tonsillitis. Then on top of it came three cases of diphtheria. Our nurses were working until they dropped and we could get no more, so we closed school and took a three week vacation....

History, we are told, does not always repeat itself, but it often rhymes; and so here we are, a very different school than the one Horace Taft knew, and yet one facing similar challenges. We will work diligently and with a profound sense of obligation to ensure the health and safety of the community; to support in all ways every teacher, student and staff member; to listen empathically to the concerns of all; and to creatively and courageously continue our mission of the education of the whole student. These are unsettled and uncharted waters we enter, and we will together be tested in ways we have never before been. I have deep faith in the resilience, perseverance and compassion of our school; and at the risk of sounding too aspirational, our goal might be that as a community working together and with trust, we emerge from this journey even stronger than we began it.

Sincerely,

William R. MacMullen '78, P'14, '16
Headmaster