



# The Taft School

March 18, 2020

Dear Taft Alumni and Friends:

I write to update you on Taft's work around the COVID-19 pandemic and what we are doing to ensure the health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and the Watertown community. A number of you have reached out to hear about our work; I appreciate your patience and understanding over the past week while our focus has been on the physical and emotional health and well-being of our students, faculty, and staff.

If I hoped for a simple "takeaway" from this letter, it would be the following. We are working really hard and with two goals in mind: ensuring both the health of everyone in the community and also the essence of community itself. You won't be surprised that during a time of extraordinary challenge and change, Taft remains resilient, strong, and loving. There simply are *so* many inspiring people, faculty and staff.

First, after extensive discussion with local health authorities, school physician Dr. Diane Fountas, and campus leaders, we have decided that we will postpone student return to campus from March break for at least three weeks. We will be moving to remote learning beginning on or around March 30, and faculty will begin planning and preparation for this work during the week of March 23. We hope to have students return to Watertown on April 13, but will be monitoring developments and making a decision on return a week before that date.

To be clear, this was an incredibly difficult decision, unlike any I have made in my years. I believe that what happens each day at Taft with passionate and committed adults and eager and bright students is inspiring. *Nothing* can replace what happens here. So, to suspend our on-campus classes and activities is *serious*. Ultimately, however, there is no question that this was the right thing to do.

Next, even as teachers were on Spring Break, we implemented a social distancing policy for faculty and staff and committed to making sure every employee feels supported, informed, and safe. As I said in the letter announcing these steps, I had then, as I do still, the faith that we can work together, with trust and courage, such that one day we will look back and say, "We had to do things really differently, and we are actually now even stronger as a community."

Then, in a sign of how rapidly changing the COVID-19 landscape is, only days later I wrote to faculty and staff again with details of even more stringent social distancing practice, which meant we would be shutting campus down to essential employees only, conducting much of our work remotely, and closing campus to outside visitors. Chief Financial Officer Jake Odden communicated with staff to detail our practices and to assure all employees that they would be compensated during this time. In addition, Dr. Diane Fountas, school physician, mandated that any staff or faculty member who had used mass public transit would be required to self-quarantine—indeed I am one of those.

We recognize that these recent steps are probably not the last we will take. With every communication, we have tried to remind community members that the COVID-19 landscape is dynamic and unstable: what makes sense one day may not the next. We are monitoring the situation daily, recognizing that we may well be taking more significant steps to ensure the safety of all community members, in particular given recent statements by the CDC.

As we look ahead, we are eager as a faculty to begin remote learning. You can imagine how difficult this will be, but I have full faith in the creativity, commitment, and passion of Taft teachers. I predict we will look back and see exciting initiatives in pedagogy. I add this as well: we see a chance to create community and spirit even as we are not physically together. I believe we have a duty to this goal, especially for students and most especially for the senior class. As of today, I cannot predict when or if we will return to normal campus life this spring. We are monitoring conditions continually.

As you would guess, things have changed in our planning of other events as well. We have cancelled on-campus gatherings, ranging from the April Board of Trustees meeting to our College Fair and Grandparents' Day. We have not yet made a decision about Alumni Weekend and Commencement in May. These are wonderful events, and we still hope to be able to hold them.

In my recent email to faculty and staff, I closed this way:

*As I said, we are in this together. That's my new motto and acronym: In This Together (ITT). You—faculty and staff together—are the backbone of what makes Taft special and unique, and we need each and every one of you to continue doing your best work now, to serve our students and the school.*

*Maybe we can aspire to that day when we go back to normal an even better school and can say, "We are an even more resilient, more trusting, more loving community than before." If that happens, we will have done some really good work, every one of us, under very trying conditions, work worthy of the school's mission and motto.*

*I'm guessing that's what happened in 1920 with Horace Taft and how he, the faculty and staff went about their exhausting and inspiring work during that terrible influenza epidemic. Now it's our turn: our challenge, our opportunity.*

These are incredibly difficult times, but I have faith that the strength and love of the Taft community will mean we get through them. Please know that I am thinking of all of you, the extended, globally interconnected Taft family — and sending thoughts of support.

Thank you for your continued support, and please be well.

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

**More information**

[Visit the Taft COVID-19 Update web page](#)

[Read Taft's announcement about the transition to remote learning](#)