

OFFICE OF THE HEADMASTER

July 21, 2020

Dear Austin Prep Parents,

The message below was one of dozens of similar messages I received from Austin Prep parents while we were operating in a remote teaching and learning environment during the spring. When parents and alumni send me notes that capture the essence of Austin Prep, I save them. During challenging times, the notes are a source of inspiration and keep me focused on doing my part to keep Austin Prep moving forward on a pathway of excellence. Words contained in messages like these are compelling in articulating and capturing the lasting and transformational impact of an Austin Prep education.

"We are writing to express our gratitude and appreciation to you and the Austin Prep staff for the strong learning and community environment that was continued over the past few months. For our children...and even our youngest...who joined the remote learning program as an [incoming student] this stability was so impressive. We can't thank you, the teachers and staff enough for the swift and solid implementation of remote learning, and accompanying communication and structure.

Daily zoom classes were so important in keeping the kids engaged, connected and accountable. We feel strongly that teenagers more than ever in these uncertain times, need and benefit from this continued structure and interaction. Although it was different and certainly not perfect, the transition was so incredibly smooth overall from our end...There is so much value in showing students how to adapt and be flexible when circumstances change or difficulties arise, especially with the strength of a committed and connected community. Austin Prep teachers and staff have been an amazing example of moving forward as best as possible during all of this. We were so delighted to see a creative yet safe/respectful solution to holding this year's graduation as well! We are so grateful and proud to be part of this community, and excited that [our youngest] will be joining [her siblings] next year at AP.

We had the opportunity to listen in on yesterday's community meeting...As parents, we felt such comfort in hearing about the updates from you in hopes for September. Thank you for being open and honest as we all try to navigate the next few months. We hope so much that students will be

on campus in any capacity, and it speaks for itself that our children miss going to school this much!! Thank you so much for your leadership, strong communication and commitment to us. We are truly grateful.”

~ Email excerpt from an Austin Prep parent

The feedback we received from parents and students about remote teaching and learning at Austin Prep was overwhelmingly positive. In my view, the success we experienced was the result of our fidelity to Austin Prep’s mission, embodied in *veritas*, *unitas*, and *caritas*. Mission is the basis of our covenant. And covenant is about what we give, not what we get. In that generosity of spirit, the entire Austin Prep community – students, staff, parents, and alumni – was self-sacrificing in some way. Our community was flexible, resilient, patient, determined, understanding, and generous – virtues that continue to keep us in good stead. All things considered, the 2019-2020 academic year was another year of growth and distinction.

The Class of 2020

The Class of 2020 is off and away. Both collectively and individually, they were exceptional. As one indicator of their talent and potential, about 87% of the Class of 2020 were awarded nearly \$19 million in scholarships from some of the best colleges and universities in the United States. According to data from our Office of College Counseling, more than one-third of the Class of 2020 is matriculating at a school in the U.S. Top 100 Colleges and Universities. Additionally, students in the Class of 2020 were admitted to close to 70% of the colleges in the *U.S. News and World Report* Top 50.

We were blessed to be able to hold an outdoor Celebration of the Eucharist for the Class of 2020 on Father Seymour Field to commission their *Journey* beyond Austin Prep’s campus. Our Catholic faith was the very reason Austin Prep was *permitted* to celebrate this religious ceremony by civic authorities under the guidelines in effect at the time. As much as Divine Providence was at work, I’m grateful for the partnership we have with the Town of Reading which helped make that special moment possible.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Although plans to reopen Austin Prep are a major focus, there are many other issues of great importance. The capability to advance other priorities, however, is directly tied to Austin Prep’s implementation of a comprehensive and realistic reopening plan, including our ability to amplify work to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion and eradicate racism and bias.

In February 2019, I announced we hired Austin Prep's first full-time professional to lead diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and programming in our community. Austin Prep's steadfast commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion remains as important as ever as we work to eliminate racism. In their Pastoral Letter on Racism, the United Conference of Catholic Bishops were unmistakable in their teaching: "Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society." Austin Prep condemns racism, bigotry, or intolerance in any form and our Catholic faith calls us to deepen our commitment to foster greater respect and justice for all.

Although we have advanced our curriculum and programs over the last several years towards greater diversity and tolerance, it's not enough; more focus and more action is required. As a part of Austin Prep's expanding commitment to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion, we're directing additional resources to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and training.

We recently announced we retained the services of [Dr. Crystal Kuykendall](#), an accomplished educator, attorney, author, and recognized expert to assist us this coming year. You may recall that Dr. Kuykendall was on campus in March when she delivered the keynote address for the [2020 St. Augustine Lecture Series](#).

Last week we announced that [Jaycob Morales](#) was appointed Coordinator of Community Engagement and Inclusion. Many in the Austin Prep community know Jaycob through his work as a member of Austin Prep's coaching staff for the last few years. A resident of Lawrence, Jaycob comes to us from Lawrence High School with a lifelong passion for education and community building.

Faculty and staff are engaged in professional development around anti-racism and expanding diversity, equity, and inclusion in our School community. Moving towards greater tolerance and racial equity will take sustained efforts to engage the entire Austin Prep community in defeating structural, systemic, explicit, and implicit racism. We will continue our work to make Austin Prep's curriculum and faculty more diverse and inclusive and advance the moral imperative that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and has worth and dignity.

Update on Reopening Plans

At the end of June, I wrote to let you know I would be in touch with you the week of July 20 with an update on our plans to reopen Austin Prep for the 2020-2021 academic year. Guidance from the government on reopening schools in the

Commonwealth continues to evolve; at times, it seems the guidance changes daily. Preliminary guidance was released at the end of June and 19 pages of additional protocols and resources from the Commissioner of Education were released last Friday, July 17.

This is an extremely complex undertaking with many moving and rapidly evolving parts. To that end, the reopening plan is yet to be finalized. The consulting firm we retained with expertise in public health administration and epidemiology is scheduled to submit their assessment and recommendations to us at the end of this month. Additionally, you may have seen press reports that the Commissioner of Education has asked schools not to release their reopening plans until early August.

Although this is not an exhaustive list, to give you a sense of the scope of what must be considered for reopening, we are developing procedures, guidelines, and protocols for cleaning and disinfecting, the health office, student medical needs, staff medical needs, food service, personal hygiene, social distancing impact on class size and other various occupancies, HVAC systems, arrival procedures, supply chains (PPE, paper products, hand sanitizer, cleaning products, etc.), Department of Public Health requirements, technology needs, master schedule considerations, and the academic calendar. Here's what I can share:

- We are planning a full return to campus.
- Faculty and staff will report the week of August 24.
- New student orientation will take place August 27 and 28.
- Classes begin Monday, August 31.
- All students and staff will be required to wear face masks along with many other important precautions that will be detailed before school commences.
- The MIAA recently announced they have pushed back the start of the fall athletic season to September 14.

Some parents have been in contact with specific questions about accommodations for students with medical needs. We will do all we can to meet the needs of students with underlying medical conditions. We'll be in touch shortly with more specific instructions and a request for individual information.

In these fragile times, any decision we make for the School will rely upon our unwavering commitment to make all decisions through the lens of Austin Prep's mission, uncompromisingly keep the health and safety of the community paramount, and continue to deliver the singular educational experience for which Austin Prep is known. Although the reopening plan will become "finalized" in a few weeks, the reality of the situation is that the plan will always be evolving to align with the changing conditions of the pandemic so that we can continue to implement best practices and keep our community

as safe as possible. The safety and health of your children is of the utmost importance to me and I'm grateful for your ongoing support, patience, understanding, and confidence.

An Update on Staffing

In the final edition of the Cougar Courier of the 2019-2020 academic year, several staff transitions were announced, including the Director of College Counseling. Our reopening plans include efforts to hire the right staff under less than ideal conditions to fill these openings. Recently, we have been notified of some additional retirements. Further, as part of our commitment to health and safety, we are planning to hire an *additional* nurse for the Health Office this year.

The College Counseling Office at Austin Prep is an established program that is not predicated on any single individual, but rather on a team approach. The college counseling program was developed as a part of a strategic plan that Austin Prep implemented several years ago. The program is established, the college counseling staff is experienced, and their collective efforts will provide the necessary stability and guidance in the year ahead. Change in staffing is a natural part of life in schools and, with that in mind, we invest in hiring experienced college counseling staff to minimize disruption in times of transition.

To that end, I've appointed current college counselors, My Doan and Cyndy Pitta, to co-lead the College Counseling Department on an interim basis for the 2020-2021 academic year. I'm grateful to them for their willingness to assume this responsibility on short notice. They are both talented and experienced and will provide the right leadership. So that we have a full complement of staff to meet the needs of our students, we have also hired an experienced college counselor from an independent school in the area.

There is a specific cycle and lengthy timeline in private schools associated with hiring school leaders such as a Director of College Counseling. The process typically begins in early fall and takes 6 to 9 months. To assist in that process, we have retained the services of [Wickenden Associates](#), a highly respected placement firm that specializes in leadership searches for independent schools. Incidentally, this is the same firm we used to coordinate the search for the Assistant Headmaster last year. The lead consultant for the Director of College Counseling search is Dr. James Wickenden, who was Dean of Admission at Princeton University before founding Wickenden Associates more than 30 years ago.

With any change there comes with it a certain degree of anticipation. In an Augustinian community like Austin Prep, the anticipation of restless hearts is an essential part of our enduring journey. The strength of our community and the values we share,

however, are what enables us to embrace change and growth with confidence. Towards that end, the College Counseling Office will receive the attentiveness it needs from me as Head of School and Dr. William Driscoll '89, Assistant Headmaster and Upper School Head, to sustain the personalized attention and quality program you have every right to expect from the College Office.

Near the start of the school year, we'll provide short professional biographies on the new faculty and staff to introduce them to the community.

Outlook on Hiring Teachers

Last year in one of my communications to parents, I shared some insights on the future of the teaching profession. We know from research on the teaching profession that great classrooms are led by great teachers. Research by *The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers* at Harvard University found “the quality of teachers is the most important school-level factor affecting students' learning.”¹ The University of Tennessee's Value-Added Research and Assessment Center reported that teacher effectiveness does more to improve student learning than any other factor.²

As we continue to look at trends in the education profession, current data shows, however, there is growing unrest, transition, and shifts in the teaching profession in a direction that continues to make it more challenging each year to attract and retain talented educators. The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating the phenomenon. Across the country, [k-12 education is experiencing an increase in retirements](#) which is being compounded by the decrease in people entering the teaching profession over the last several years.

According to the United States Department of Education, 48 states reported a shortage of math teachers in 2017-2018. Market Watch, a subsidiary of Dow Jones & Co., published a report stating that 22% of all college students studied education as a major in 1975. By 2015, however, fewer than one in ten Americans are now majoring in education.³ Harvard's Project on *The Next Generation of Teachers* reported that about one-third of today's teachers worked in another profession first and likely have not completed traditional teacher programs. They also reported that

¹ <https://projectnqt.gse.harvard.edu/> Accessed July 19, 2020

² <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/104136/chapters/The-Power-of-an-Effective-Teacher-and-Why-We-Should-Assess-It.aspx#fn5> Accessed July 19, 2020

³ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/fewer-americans-are-majoring-in-education-but-will-students-pay-the-price-2018-02-14> Accessed July 19, 2020

As a cohort, [today's teachers] were more likely than their predecessors to treat teaching as a short-term career and to be dissatisfied with the conditions of their work—its professional isolation, standardized pay, uniform roles, and lack of opportunity for leadership and advancement.⁴

Education is a service profession and Austin Prep will continue to adapt to meet the evolving challenges of attracting and retaining exceptional teachers. We are committed to investing in our greatest resource – our people. The Board of Trustees is dedicated to providing competitive salaries and benefits, funding continuing education and professional development, supporting teacher recognition for a job well done, and compensating teachers for performance excellence.

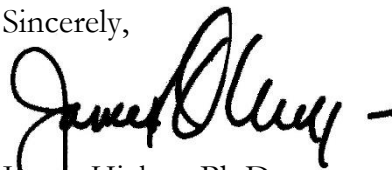
We have an extraordinary faculty and staff grounded in *caritas*. Since my arrival at Austin Prep eight years ago, we have made considerable investments in teaching and learning. For years, we have funded faculty summer sabbaticals. We encourage and support strong professional development for faculty to keep them at the pinnacle of their craft which strengthens their efforts to make the curriculum more diverse, supports academic freedom to pursue their teaching passions, and augments networking with top-flight educators at national and regional conferences – including making presentations at these conference on best practices from Austin Prep.

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In the year ahead, we will likely encounter some challenges and bumps in the road, but I have confidence in our community to meet the moment, rise to the occasion, and exemplify our mission. If there was anything that was apparent to me during this past spring, it was the importance of covenant and community at Austin Prep. I'll be in touch again the week of August 10th. In the meantime, don't hesitate to be in touch with me for any reason if I can be helpful (jhickey@austinprep.org).

Best wishes for a continued summer of rest and recharge.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Hickey -". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line at the end.

James Hickey, Ph.D.
Headmaster

⁴ <https://projectngt.gse.harvard.edu/> Accessed July 19, 2020