

Dear friends,

For the last twenty years I have sent separate late-summer letters to families and faculty, carrying forward a tradition that dated back to the early days of the school. I've usually regarded the letters as a chance to say something I felt was important about our work as a school. I floated hopes or proposals for the year, some of which panned out, some not. But at the very least these letters staked out some views, concerns, and plans and opened the door for discussion. For that reason, I hope they will continue beyond my tenure.

Given that this summer and the coming year are unusual in so many ways, and given that this is my final such August assignment, I thought I'd write one note to the full community to reflect on the past few months and the coming year, and to comment on the challenges we face and the opportunities ahead.

Last January when the Board opened up the search process for Commonwealth's next Head of School, we assumed that the search and transition would be, for many, the focus of the 2020–2021 school year. But with the arrival of the pandemic in March it became clear that we were facing a storm, one unprecedented in Commonwealth's history, and one that will take sustained effort to weather. The remarkable commitment and talent of our faculty, staff, and students saw us through a difficult but comparatively successful spring. As we wrapped up the year and were beginning to turn toward planning for the fall reopening, the national explosion of anger following the tragic murder of George Floyd, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and demonstrations against the country's festering legacy of racism, the subsequent outcry at Commonwealth from the young alums of color, and the petition for Commonwealth to address this legacy within its walls gave rise to a third major challenge for the board and school.

These transitions and crises place the school at a turning point. We—its leadership, teachers, students, and alums—recognize that Commonwealth must change significantly if it is to fully live up to its ideals and commitments as an urban school that provides a rigorous education to students from all backgrounds, racial, ethnic, and economic.

A former teacher of mine used to point out that the most unsettled times in history have been the most creative, so I remain hopeful that Commonwealth will come through these challenges and changes renewed and stronger. I'd like to share a few promising directions.

I want to start by offering my deep thanks to the young people who called for action: the alums—Faria Afreen '16, Iman Ali '18, Gueinah Blaise '16, Alexis Mitchell '16, and Tarang Saluja '18—who first spoke up, and to the current students—Kim Hoang '21, Ryan Phan '22, and Alan Plotz '21—who have helped spearhead the petition. They mobilized the school to address our shortcomings substantively. They reminded us that "Commonwealth's mascot (the Warsaw mermaid) is supposed to signify the school's commitment to resistance. The path of resistance is not linear, it requires consistent, steady work, even when there are obstacles." It took courage to speak up, and they have worked remarkably hard, in the midst of the pandemic, to press for action.

It would have been easy for these alums, given the anger and frustration they felt, simply to wash their hands of the school and move on. They did not, and I hope that part of the reason they persisted is that, despite it all, they still care about the school and what it can become. They have stirred a response and activity among the faculty and staff and among trustees the likes of which I have not seen in my decades at Commonwealth. The summer has been filled with special trustee meetings, sessions between trustees and alums, student-led discussions, meetings among faculty and staff, all to find ways forward.

When I shared the alums' initial letter of complaint with the faculty and staff, nearly half of their number volunteered to help address the issues raised. They recognized that the concerns spoke to real problems, and they met over the summer, as part of the Equity and Anti-Racism Task Force, to review our work—including culture and curriculum—and chart possible changes. The number who stepped forward reflect the depth of the commitment to constructive change. The Board's readiness to respond and engage outside expertise to shape and create the position of Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion ensures that the school will have the guidance that the teachers and staff need and want, guidance that the school needs. I am deeply grateful to Mónica Schilder and David Hodgkins for leading the faculty group, and to the trustees and faculty who, as the InCommon Committee, are coordinating the overall effort: John Dowd, Janique Parrott-Gaffney '04, Rebecca Jackman, Sophia Meas, and Mónica Schilder. In addition, the Board and staff are shaping a plan that will support and sustain these and other initiatives, and a number of trustees have pledged funding to get this effort off to a strong start. We will need the deep and broad support of our whole community if we are to make the progress so many are calling for.

We have also learned much from our crash course in remote learning. Last spring was our baptism by fire, and Commonwealth's teachers came through terrifically, exhausted though all were by June. Since then we've continued to learn as we've readied ourselves for this fall's hybrid system: teachers have been sharing among themselves creative solutions to making online and concurrent learning more effective. We saw success this summer with remote work for a portion of our Dive In program as well as two summer enrichment courses that Messrs. Connolly and Letarte taught online. We've seen clearly that the advantages and strengths of in-person teaching and learning are all we believed they are, but we've also recognized that remote learning may well serve us in various ancillary ways, expanding the school's reach and creating new opportunities. We can, to offer one example, host assembly speakers remotely: Our first assembly this year will be by an early Commonwealth alumnus, Roy DeBerry '66, as he speaks from his home in Mississippi about his coming of age during the Civil Rights movement in his home state.

Demonstrated commitment to DEI issues remains an essential qualification Commonwealth's Search Committee has sought in the school's next Head. In the coming weeks, three finalists will come on virtual visits to meet and speak with representatives of all constituencies, and sometime in the following month the Board will announce Commonwealth's sixth leader. I arrived in 1985 at a school that felt strongly the complex play of energies and commitments of its founder, Charles Merrill. Every Head until now has known him and worked with teachers and trustees who worked with him. As with many young organizations, "This is the way we do it," while not the only note of the last twenty years, has, still, exercised a strong pull. Today Commonwealth's faculty, staff, and Board no longer feel constrained by the school's past, and so are freer to help the next leader refashion our curriculum and culture so as to position Commonwealth to fulfill, more deeply and more effectively, the founding vision that remains a central, if imperfectly realized, commitment to serving students from all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The efforts of the students, faculty and staff, alums, and trustees all speak to the dedication to the school and its ideals felt by so many. I am proud and grateful to have led such a place for two decades. I hope that as we move forward all will trust the good will on all sides. The inertia of an institution and its leadership can make necessary the language of demands, but Commonwealth will be best served if, with trust in each other's motives, we continue to engage in the constructive dialogue this process has sparked. In all of these areas—diversity and inclusion, remote learning and reopening, and even the new leadership and its priorities—not all will agree on every proposal or detail. But I'm confident that the shared sense that our aims align will help make the school a healthier, more inclusive place for all of its students, faculty, and staff; will strengthen Commonwealth's reach and influence; and will assure the next Head of School a strong, promising start.

All involved in these efforts recognize the importance of communication, and in the coming weeks and months, we will be reaching out to keep you apprised of the work and to ask for your support. Please reach out to us with any questions or comments. The readiness of Commonwealth's teachers, staff, students, parents, and alums to step forward when needed has been one of the great rewards of being part of this school for thirty-five years. Don't stop now.



Bill Wharton
Headmaster



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