



Headmaster's Opening Letter to Students and Parents

Greetings, Commonwealth students and parents.

I hope that you have all enjoyed pleasant summers full of interesting activities, good reading, and the downtime needed to rest up for another school year. For the last fifty-five years, my life has followed an academic calendar—as a student and teacher—and I still feel uneasy when mid-August comes and the scramble to get ready for the new school year begins. In June the prospect is one of long, relaxing months ahead. There's a lesson in this pattern about the way our expectations shape our sense of time.

Please take the time to read through the whole letter—students, pay particular attention to the section about the discussion we hope to have with you through the coming semester, and parents, pay particular attention to the final section.

New Spaces, New Faces

Over the last eight weeks, crews have been busy at school on several projects. Some (the restoration of the storage vault that reaches from Mr. Antoine's basement workroom under the Dartmouth Street sidewalk) you will not notice. You students will see (and, I hope, appreciate) the new dishwasher when your turn comes on lunch cleanup. You will also notice the reconfigured hallway at the rear of the second floor—it will be wider and have a drinking fountain. The other big facilities change has been the move of our business/development/communications office from 29 Commonwealth Avenue to 66 Marlborough Street. We are renting space in the Parish House of First Church, where we hold our concerts and graduation. That office will be the home base for Katie Athey and Sue Tibert (Finance), Emma Bishop, Alisha Elliott, and Carly Renshaw (Development), and Melody Komyetov (Communications and Marketing).

Students should know that one familiar face will not be with us any longer when school begins. Paulina Martinez, Commonwealth's kitchen assistant, is leaving for a full-time position at Harvard, where she has held another part-time position for as long as she has been with us. For over twenty years, Paulina has worked quietly and with tireless good cheer to help keep the machine of Commonwealth's food program running as smoothly as possible. We say goodbye to her with deep gratitude and best wishes.

We are welcoming a group of new faculty and staff this fall, so come September, there will be adults as well as new students who will need help learning the ropes. We hope that you veteran students will make all newcomers feel welcome. The new faculty and staff are the following (in alphabetical order by last name):

Emma Bishop will join us as a development assistant, helping Alisha Elliott and Carly Renshaw manage our various fundraising efforts and coordinating a range of school events. A graduate of St. Anselm College, where she earned a Presidential Scholarship and graduated Magna Cum Laude with a B.A. in Politics and Criminal Justice, Emma has worked in internships in the office of Gov. Charles Baker of Massachusetts and most recently completed an internship in the advancement office at St. Anselm.

Caleb Colpitts will be Commonwealth's new teacher for both Drawing & Painting and Printmaking. Caleb comes to us from Cambridge School of Weston, where he taught visual arts for three years and served as a dorm parent. He has also taught, since 2013, as an apprentice and printmaking instructor, at the Putney School Summer Programs. Caleb has a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design, where he majored in jewelry and metalsmithing and minored in printmaking. He also has a Certificate in Progressive Education from the Progressive Education Lab. Caleb is a practicing artist; his work can be seen at www.calebcolpitts.com.

Bouchra Danielkebir, Commonwealth alumna of 2011, will be our new Dean of Diversity and Inclusion. Bouchra attended Spelman College, where she earned numerous honors, and the University of Georgia's School of Public and International Affairs, where she earned an M.A. in International Policy. She has held a number of internships—in Washington D.C. and Bangkok, with the U.S. Department of State, worked as a research associate at the University of Georgia in the area of women, politics, and religion in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and for the last year, after deciding to move back into education, she worked as Diversity Coordinator at the Fern School in Concord, MA.

Joshua Eagle will be Commonwealth's Dean of Students. Josh has a B.A. in Creative Writing and Literature/Psychology from the University of Michigan and a Psy.D. from the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology. For the past ten years, Josh has been at the Brookline Community Mental Health Center, first as Coordinator of Adolescent Services and then as Coordinator of Child Team and Senior Staff Psychologist, where he has done extensive work with children and, among other roles, consulted with Brookline schools, including Brookline High.

Alexander Ginzburg will teach math, standing in for Anna Moss during her sabbatical. Alex, who has an M.A. in mathematics and mechanics from the University of St. Petersburg in Russia, came to teaching after a career in finance. He has taught math for the past two years at The Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut; before that, he taught at the University of Hartford and Northwestern Connecticut Community College. Alex is the husband of Commonwealth alumna, Julia Ginzburg '91.

Sherline Heriveaux will join us as our new communications and administrative assistant. In this new role, she will be supporting Melody Komyetov with school communications and Stephanie Poyrier at the front office. Sherline, a graduate of University of Massachusetts Boston with a B.A. in Communications, worked as a communications intern most recently at Harvard University, where she edited content for its community websites. She has also held internships at City on a Hill Charter School and WBZ-TV.

Samantha Nieto Vargas will teach beginning photography. Samantha is a graduate of Lesley University's College of Art and Design, where she earned an M.A. in Photography and Integrated Media, and Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Arts and Design, where she earned a B.F.A. in Photography. She taught photography at Lesley and edited the university's M.F.A. in Photography Thesis Exhibition Catalog. She was awarded two residencies in Puebla, Mexico, sponsored by the Arquitectos Foundation, and she was featured in numerous group exhibitions in galleries in Boston, Cambridge, Phoenix and Tempe, Arizona, Sebastopol, California, and Oaxaca, Mexico. Her work can be seen at www.samanhanieto.com.

Cesar Perez will teach Spanish. Cesar comes to us from Middlesex School, where he taught Spanish, Spanish literature, and courses in Spanish history for two years. Before that he taught Spanish and literature at, among other institutions, Hotchkiss School, M.I.T., and Harvard Extension School. Cesar earned an undergraduate degree in journalism at Universidad de La Habana in his native Cuba, an M.A. in Spanish at University of Iowa, and an M.A. in Romance Languages and Literature at Harvard.

Matthew Poage will teach computer science and math. Matthew comes to us from Miss Porter's School, where he served as Math and Computer Science Chair for fifteen years. Matthew has a Ph.D. in Mathematical Logic and an M.A. in Mathematics from Dartmouth, and did his undergraduate work at Amherst College.

Kate Ventimiglia will run our drama program while Susan Thompson is on sabbatical. With a B.S. with honors in Theater from Skidmore and an M.A. from Emerson College, Kate joins us after a year teaching theater at Shore Country Day and Glen Urquhart Schools in Beverly. Before that she served as Lead Theater Teacher for Central Square Theater's youth education program, and taught at Talbot Innovation School in Fall River and at Emerson.

Discussions for the coming months and the Student Meeting

At the final faculty meeting of the year, we had a long conversation about technology and our school culture, sparking a sense among many that more of us are spending more of our time looking at screens, often crossing the line from constructive to compulsive use. Faculty and staff agreed that imposing new regulations on the use of various devices would not be in keeping with the culture of the school and would amount to a certain backfire. They also recognized that the appropriate use of smartphones and other devices is not simply a "bad issue," but something we all wrestle with. So we agreed that I would lay out in this letter some questions and a framework, and that in the coming months, formally and informally, we could talk about the matter and work toward a consensus about some guidelines that would protect some of the signal strengths of our community. So this will not be an old Headmaster's curmudgeonly rant about today's young going to hell in a handbasket.

So—at the risk of sounding like an old guy talking about the old days—as long as there have been portable listening devices (the Walkman was introduced by Sony in 1979), there has been, despite the myth about only one rule at Commonwealth, a ban that said "No listening to Walkmen/Discmen (1984)/Pods (2001)/iPhones (2007) while in the school building." (To be honest, I think the rule read "Walkmen" into the early '90s, when there may have been some students who didn't know what a Walkman was.) We also banned such devices from the Hancock weekend, and that ban was taken fairly seriously until the early '00s (meaning students were careful about hiding the devices they brought).

The reason for the rule, as many of you have heard at rules assemblies, was our desire to preserve the school as a place for face-to-face living, for conversations among ourselves, and for engagement with our environment. Personal devices make it too easy to wall ourselves off into audio-oooons, oblivious to the life going on around us (including the views, activities, and sounds in and of the woods up at Winona).

Those guidelines seemed to suffice when we had just music to compete with. With the evolution of devices came podcasts, on-demand videos, games, texting, Instagram, Snapchat, and other apps that I know nothing about but you may use every day (does anyone still do Chatroulette?). So it's not just hands from U2 through Beyoncé that have exerted a tempting pull on our attention and time, but our drive to connect with our friends, diversions from Angry Birds to Fortnite, and, for some of us (adults), the compulsion to check our friends' latest FB post, complete with photo, about the amazing meal he had last night at some new Seaport restaurant. (As I've been writing this letter I've used my phone to look up the evolution of the Walkman and the first years of U2.)

One of our aims as a school is to help you—our students—develop habits of mind that will be valuable to you throughout your lives. Among the most important of these is the ability to give sustained attention to a person, conversation, text, problem, or task. Much of the deep and lasting satisfaction we get in life, and many of the significant accomplishments we turn out, depend on our ability to stay focused on a job. Many of the best lessons we learn come from dealing, in a sustained, thoughtful way, with people and problems, even those that make us want to disappear into cyberspace. The creators of smartphones and apps know that this habit of sustained attention militates against their purposes, and that our desire to go somewhere pleasant pulls us toward their goal: to divert your eyes and attention to their products and ads as often as they can. And they are very good at what they do. (See this recent [New York Times](#) piece on the growing debate about the "attention economy.")

This topic came up, again, because teachers and staff were worried as they saw more of you (and themselves) silently gazing at phones. Sometimes, yes, you were checking your math assignment on Google Drive, but many were gaining (though game-playing is not supposed to happen in school), watching amusing videos, sending friends funny texts, and other activities that do not conform to our guidelines for appropriate use of technology in school. (You can read about those guidelines in the Handbook.)

We adults don't want to become police who are always looking over your shoulder. But it does seem we should talk about this: there are some among us for whom the addictive power of electronic devices creates real problems, and we hope that most of you agree that caring for our face-to-face community is worthwhile. Since we know that there are many of you (and us) who have figured out ways to manage our use of devices, it seems best to have a discussion. The question, I suppose, is how we can work together to make sure that we use these tools intelligently and avoid the compulsive use that can pull us off track and away from each other. How do we cultivate the power of attention in the midst of so many powerful forms of distraction?

A good start to this discussion will be our annual student-faculty open discussion on Tuesday, September 4, at 1:30 p.m. We moved this event last year to Orientation Day in the hope of making it easier for students to attend. New students will be away on the Orientation Day outing, but on this topic, I suspect we'll use the meeting on September 4 to lay out guidelines for conversations, and substantive discussion will come later. This is also a time for returning students to meet as a group to formulate questions that you have, to express hopes and concerns for the school, and present them to the faculty and me. As I say, while we may not take up every idea, we do take these conversations seriously and look forward to hearing what you have to say. Please show up and speak up. I would counsel that the topics be matters of general student concern, as opposed to a list of an individual's specific issues. The latter are best handled in one-on-one conversations with one's advisor or with me. My door is always open.

This year the annual student meeting will take place in the library at 1:30 p.m. Students who want to take part in that meeting should meet in Room 2C at 11:30 a.m. for a planning session to discuss what you want to say and put together an agenda for the afternoon meeting with the faculty.

You can choose a facilitator or facilitators to lead your discussion. **This year we will offer lunch to students who participate in that discussion. We will send out a poll next week to get a sense of numbers for Heather and Isiah.**

School Forms, Handbook, and Other Business

You should have received an email from Rebecca Jackman on August 10 confirming course registration for the coming year and containing information about book ordering. If you have any questions or difficulties determining what books you need or in purchasing them, please get in touch with Emma Johnson. We are grateful to the Parents' Association for putting together a textbook exchange on August 28.

Let me turn to a few perennial reminders. First, each student's required forms were due on August 15. You received an email on August 1 with links to the forms. They are also available on the [parents page](#) of our website. **Students cannot attend school without the required forms.** Any student whose required forms are not in by the first day of school (September 7) will be asked not to return until the office has them in hand. **Again, a student for whom we do not have completed forms will not be permitted back after the first day of school.** A checklist of the required forms is appended to this letter.

Note that among those forms is an acknowledgment that you, parents and students, have read the Parent-Student Handbook. If you have not already done so, please download a copy and read it carefully. I would especially call your attention to the following sections:

- The paragraph on absences on page 16. Please notify us of any day that a child will not be in school. We need to hear from the parent, not the student, about illness or absences. Also, please do not make travel plans that include school days—the latter can be a particular problem at the beginning and end of vacations. With exams, Hancock weekends, and Project Week taking up more than three weeks of the school year, we expect full participation on the days when classes meet.
- The section on communication on pages 41-43.
- The appendices on harassment, hazing, bullying, and other serious misconduct: Cruelty among students has been a rare occurrence at Commonwealth. We want to make it perfectly clear that it has no place in the school.
- Appendix H, starting on page 76, outlines the Allergen Awareness and Response policies, which we revised two years ago. Any families for whom this is an issue should read this carefully.

Second, parents are invited to Back-to-School Night on **Thursday, September 13 at 6 p.m.** We will serve a light supper, have a brief announcement and orientation session, and then send parents off to visit abbreviated classes to meet teachers and learn about the courses their children are taking. We hope you can make it. Please RSVP to Carly Renshaw, Parent Liaison, rensshaw@commschool.org, as soon as possible.

At Commonwealth, the advisor has always been the primary point of contact between home and school. Parents should get to know their children's advisors, but you are also welcome to reach out to Rebecca Jackman, assistant head, or me. Email is the most reliable way to reach us, even if only to set up a phone conversation.

I look forward to welcoming all of you to the new school year in person in a couple of weeks.

Yours,

William Wharton
Headmaster

School Forms due August 15th:

Note: Any student for whom we do not have completed forms will not be permitted back after the first day of school.

- Handbook Acknowledgement Form: Please read the Parent-Student Handbook before completing the Handbook Acknowledgement form.
- Physician's Medical Report with an immunizations history (This is due every year—if your child's appointment is after the first day of school, we need the date of that visit. Ask your doctor to send us the Medical Report that includes an immunizations history).
- Emergency Medical Release Form
- Universal Authorization Form
- Massachusetts Pre-participation Head Injury/Concussion Reporting Form

Opening Dates:

- September 4: Orientation Day
- September 4: 11:30 a.m. & 1:30 p.m.: Open discussion, students and faculty
- September 5: Classes begin. Opening Assembly at 8:30 a.m.
- September 13: Back-to-School Night for Parents

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